



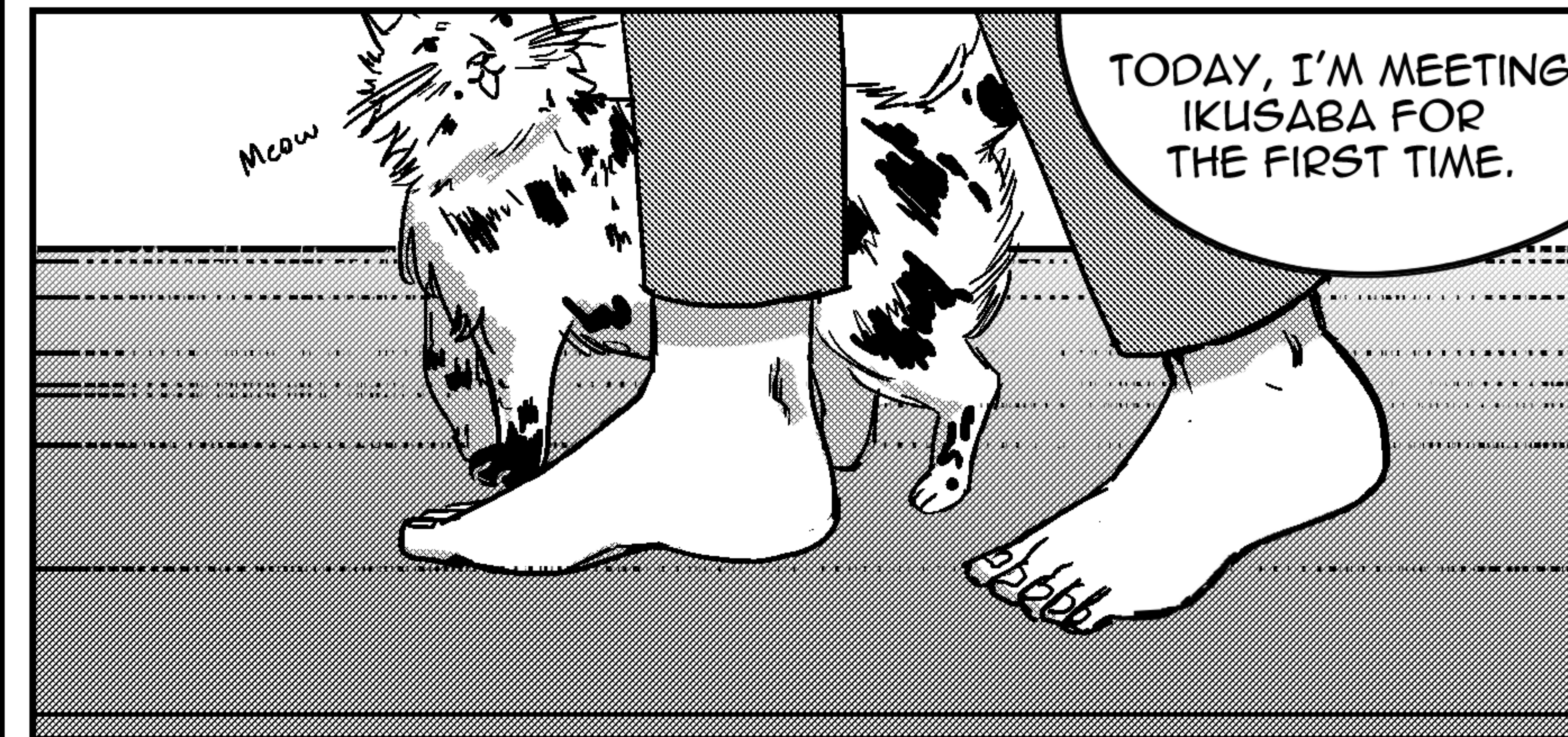
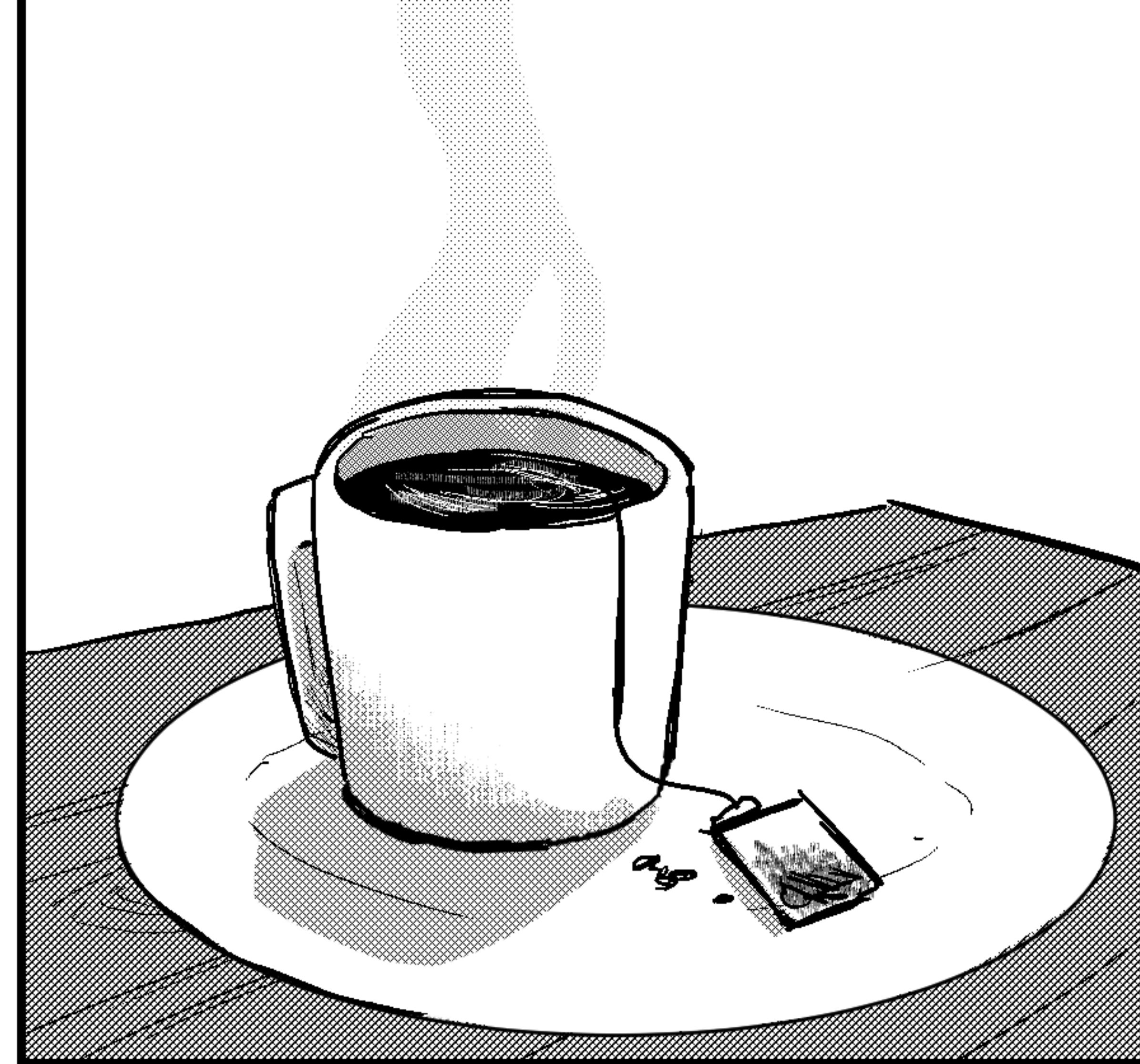
I AM MUKURO
A MUKURO IKUSABA FANZINE



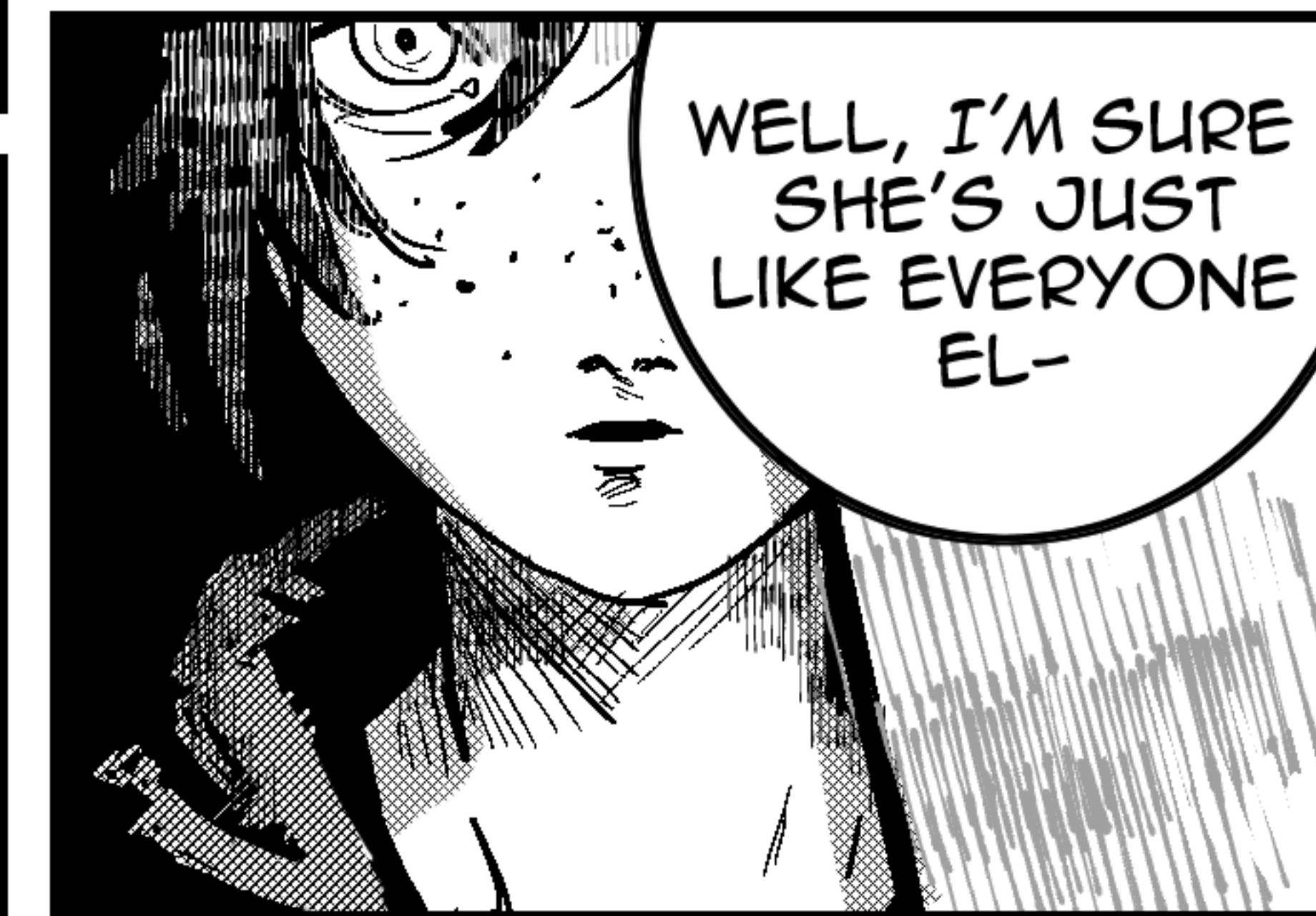
**Thank you to everyone who has
downloaded "I am Mukuro!"
We greatly appreciate everyone's
support throughout the making of
the zine. Please enjoy the zine
dedicated to Mukuro Ikusaba!
- Rin, Co-Head**

SPARRING BUDDIES

*READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT.



TODAY, I'M MEETING IKUSABA FOR THE FIRST TIME.



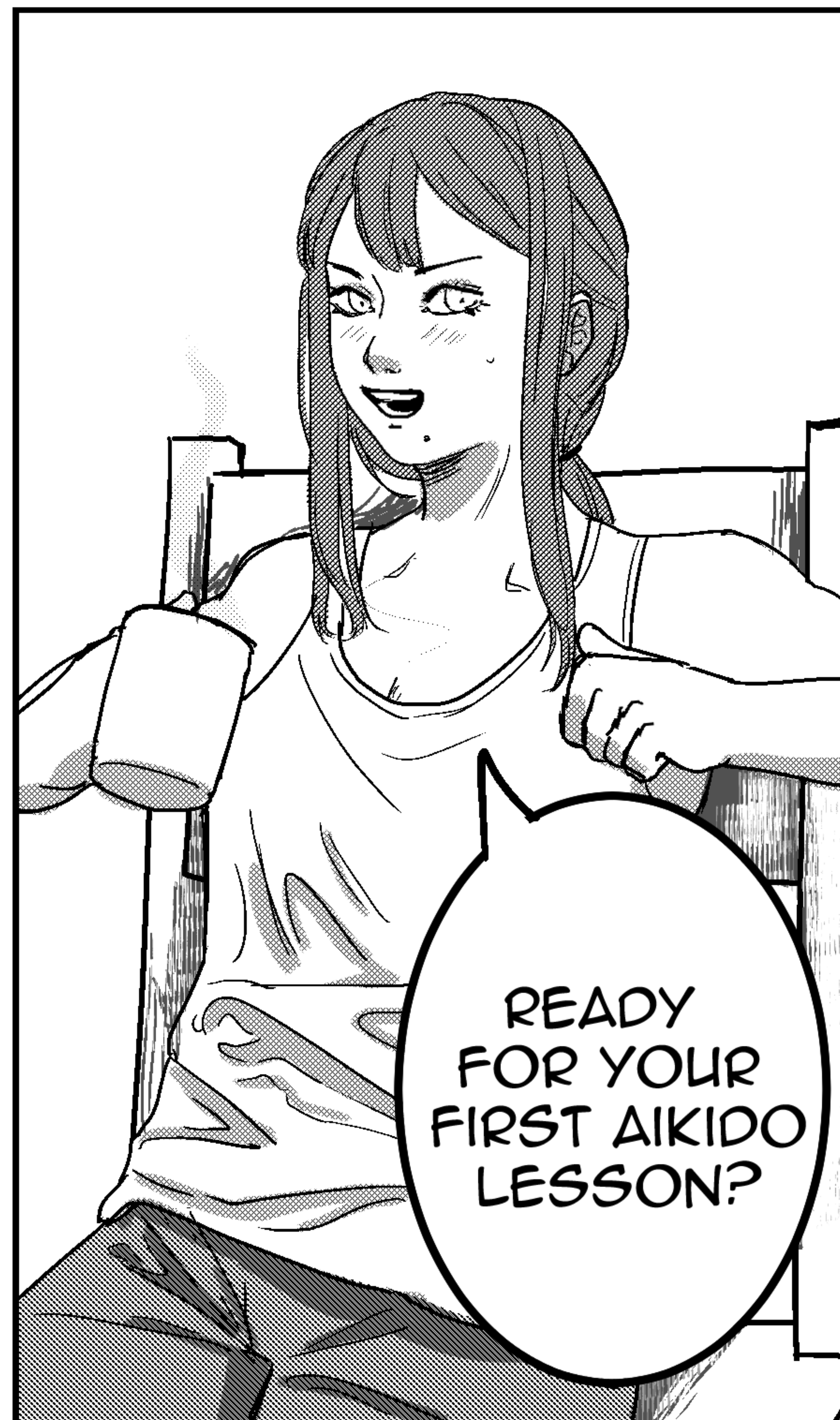
WELL, I'M SURE SHE'S JUST LIKE EVERYONE EL-



ASAHINA TOLD ME SHE'S QUIET, AND LUDENBERG SAID SHE'S "A BETTER POKER-FACE THAN ME!"



SO,

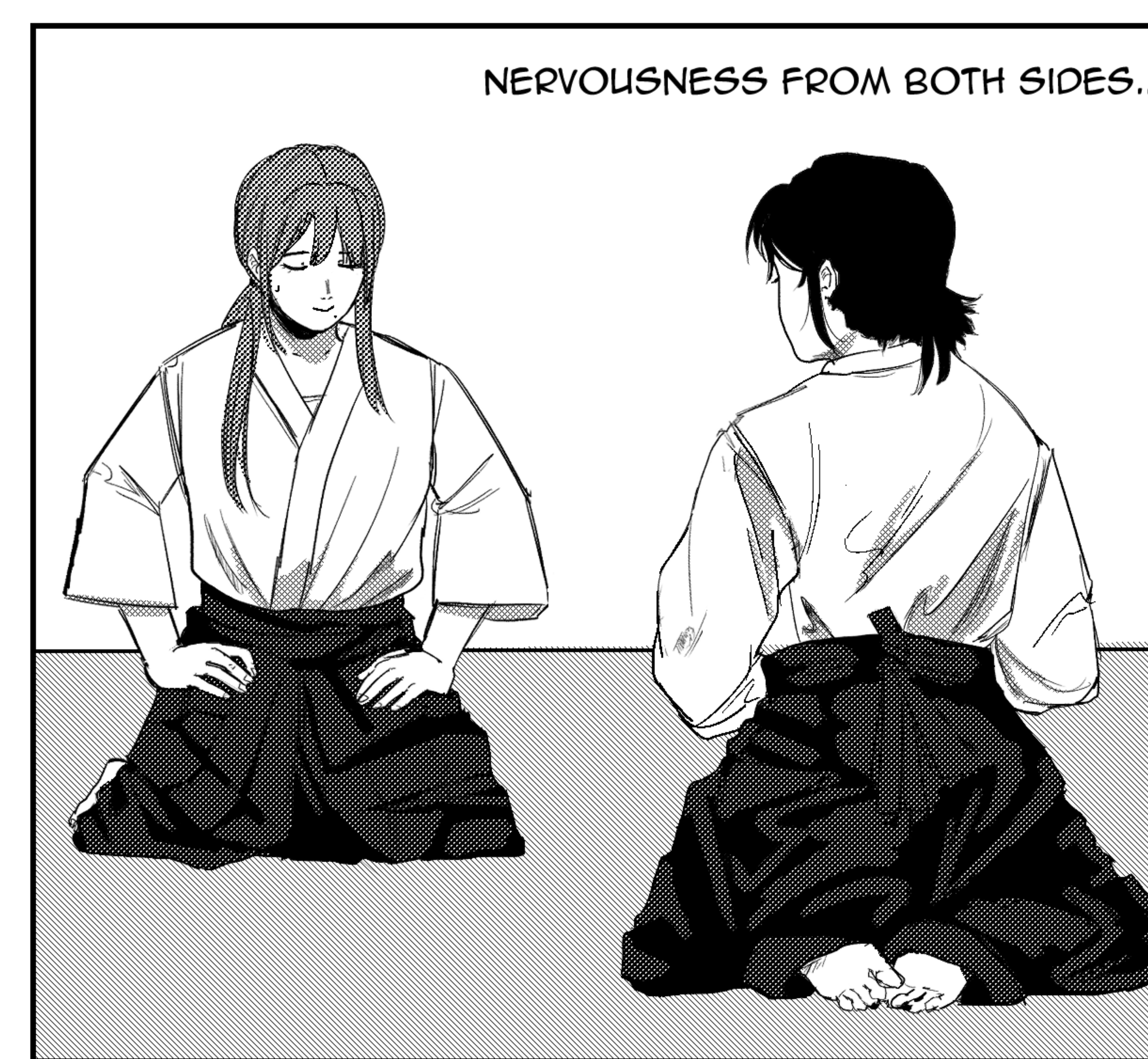


READY FOR YOUR FIRST AIKIDO LESSON?

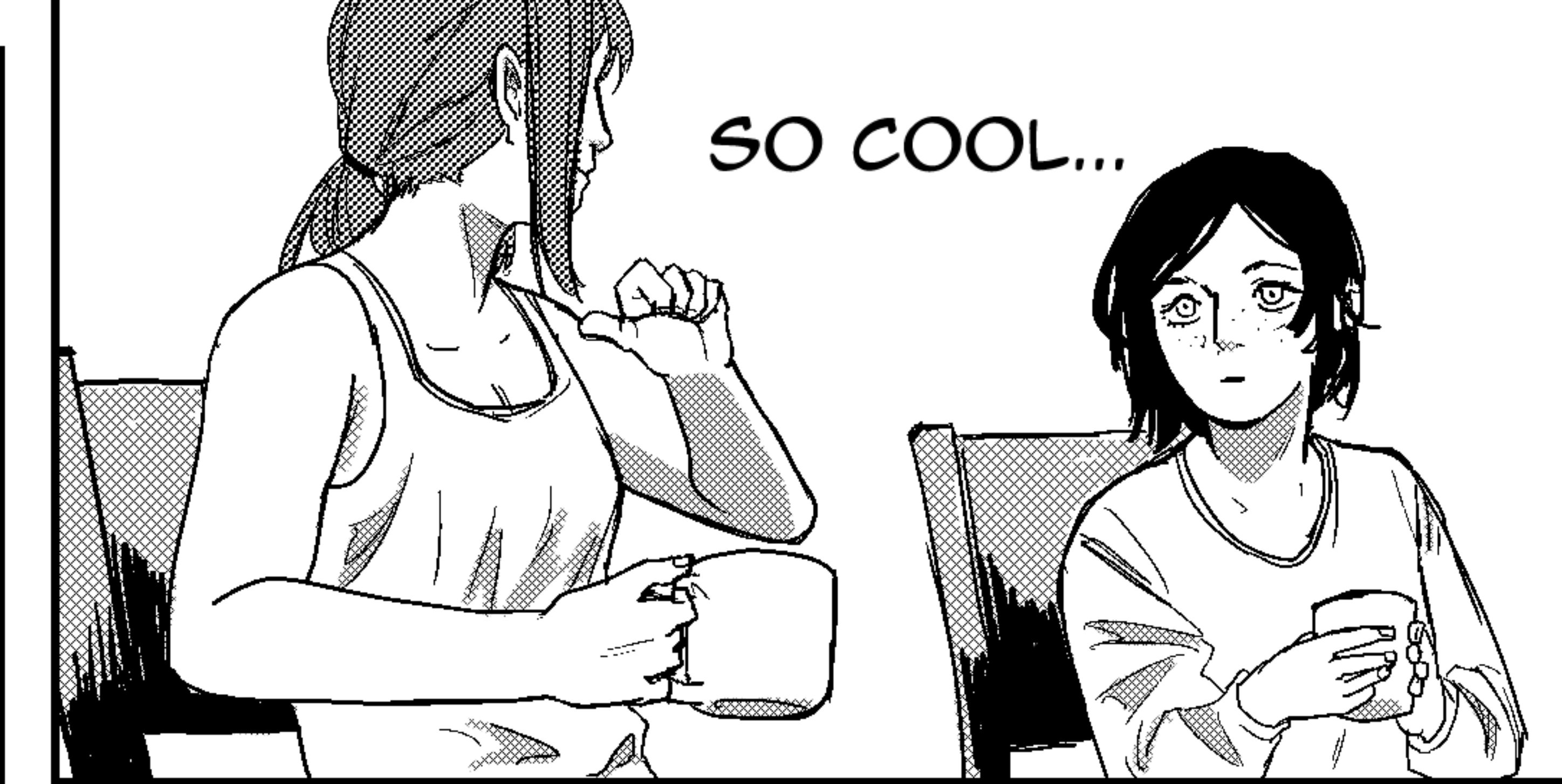


SORRY I'M LATE, I DID RUN HERE.

YOU'RE SOAKING!



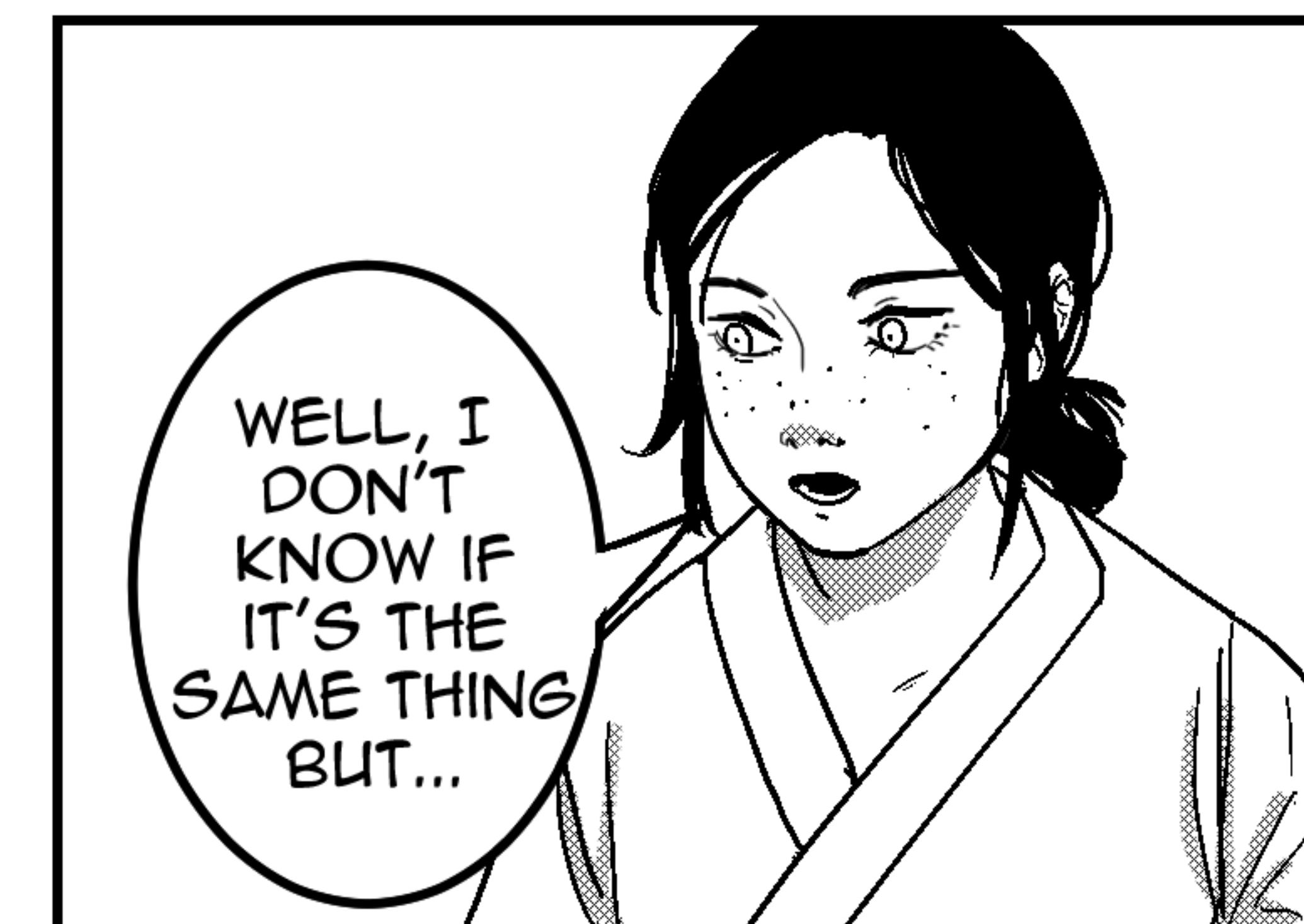
NERVOUSNESS FROM BOTH SIDES...



SO COOL...



LET'S DO IT.

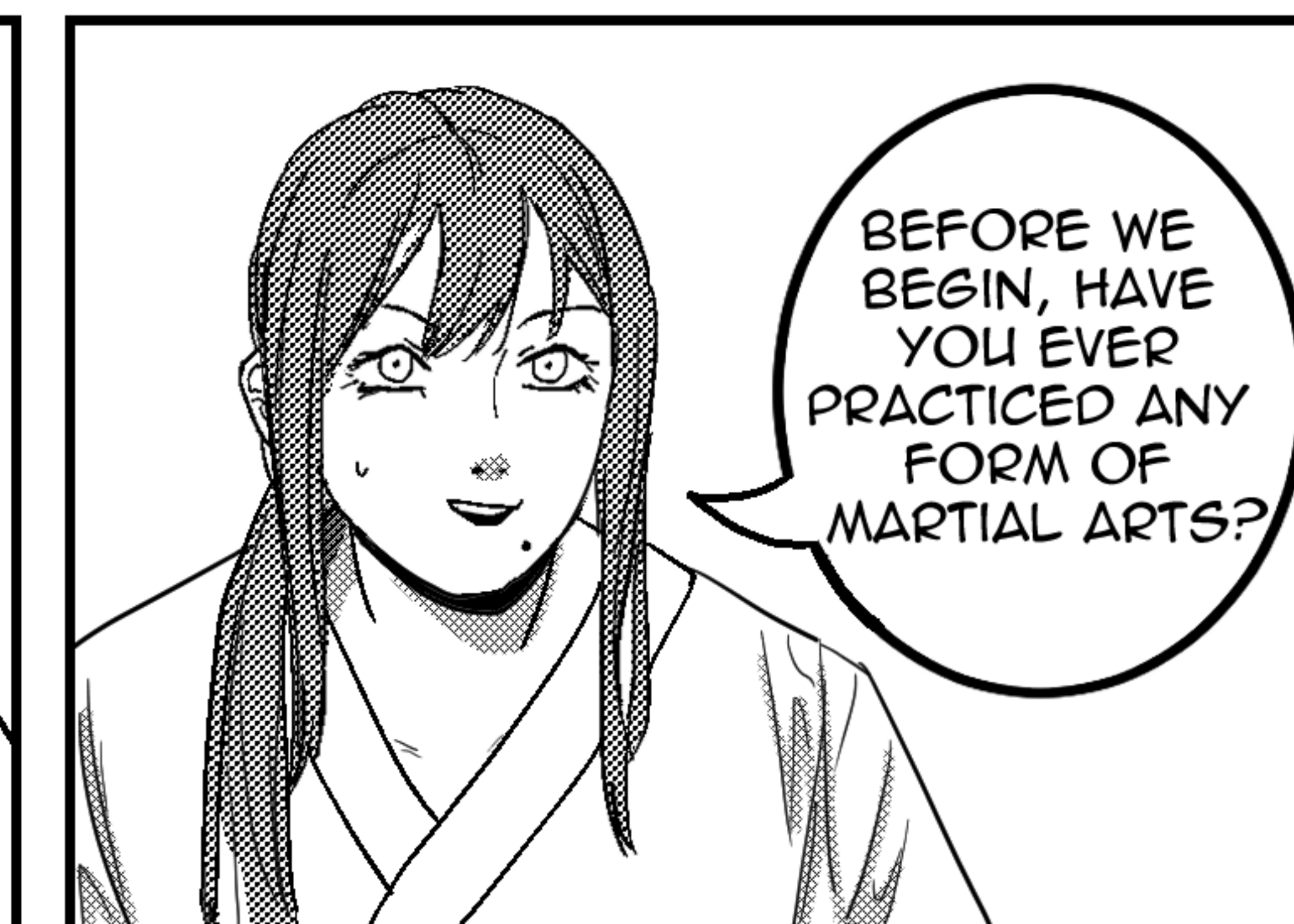


WELL, I DON'T KNOW IF IT'S THE SAME THING BUT...

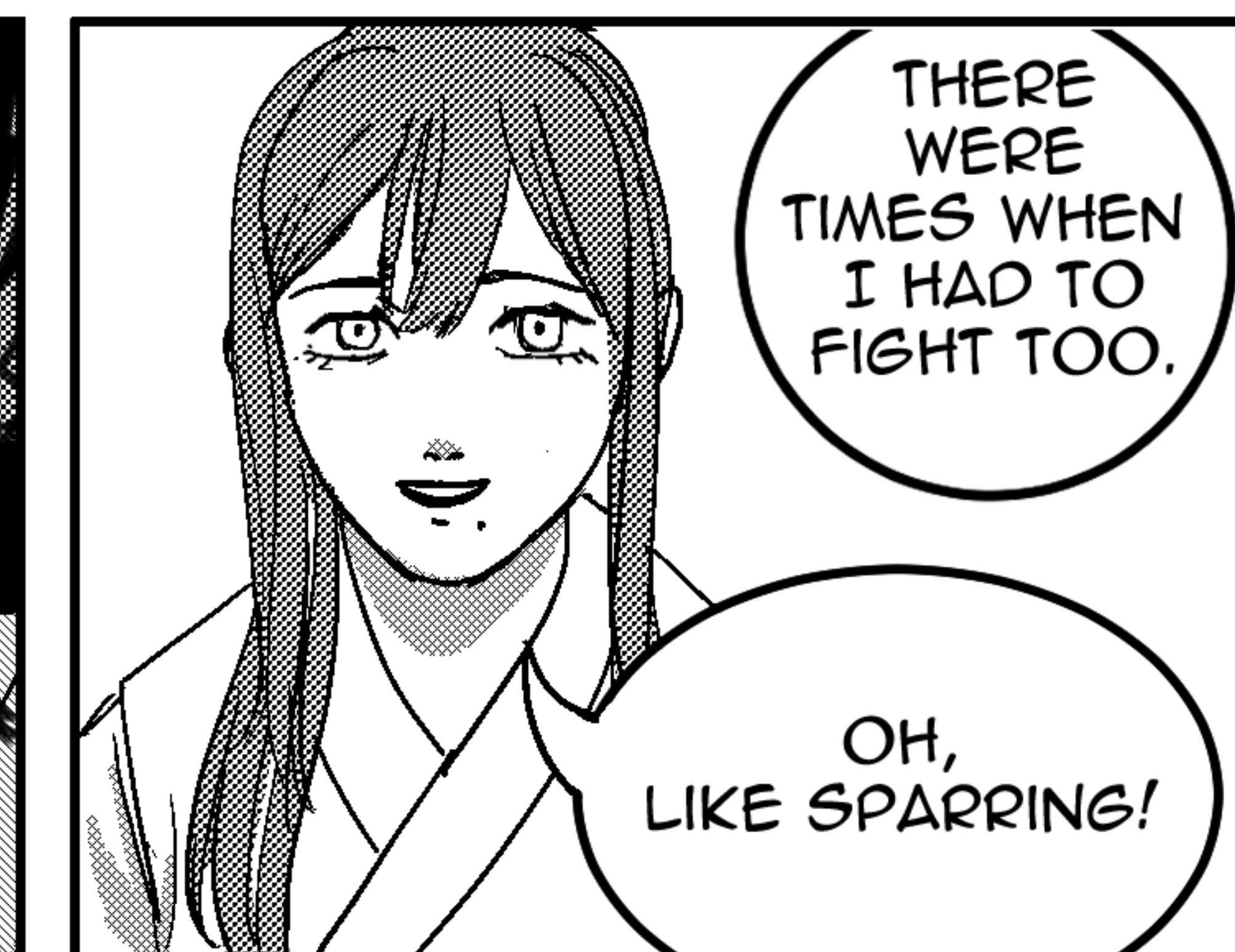
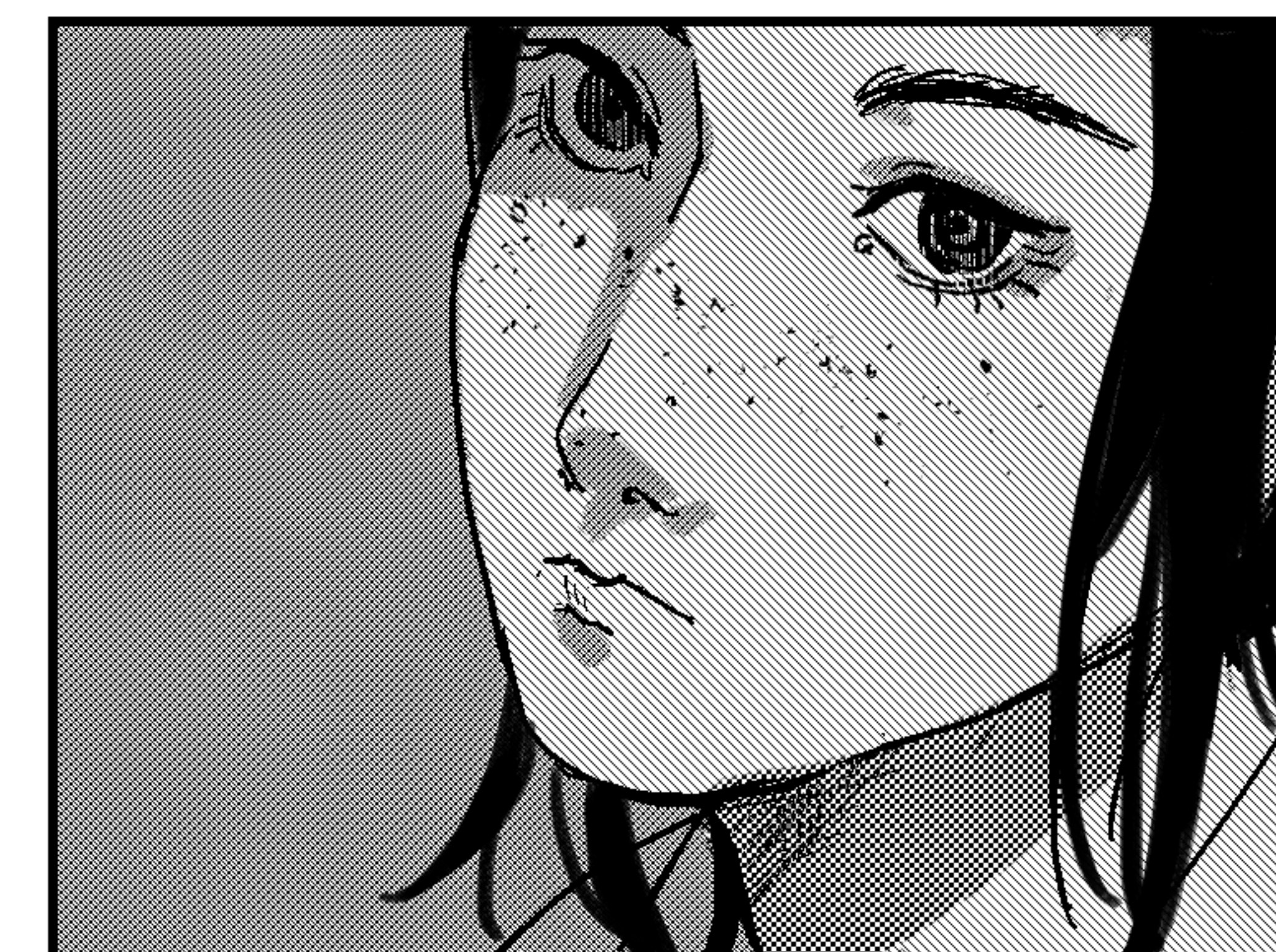


WE'LL HAVE TO START BASIC SELF DEFENSE MOVES IF NOT.

ANY START IS A GOOD START.

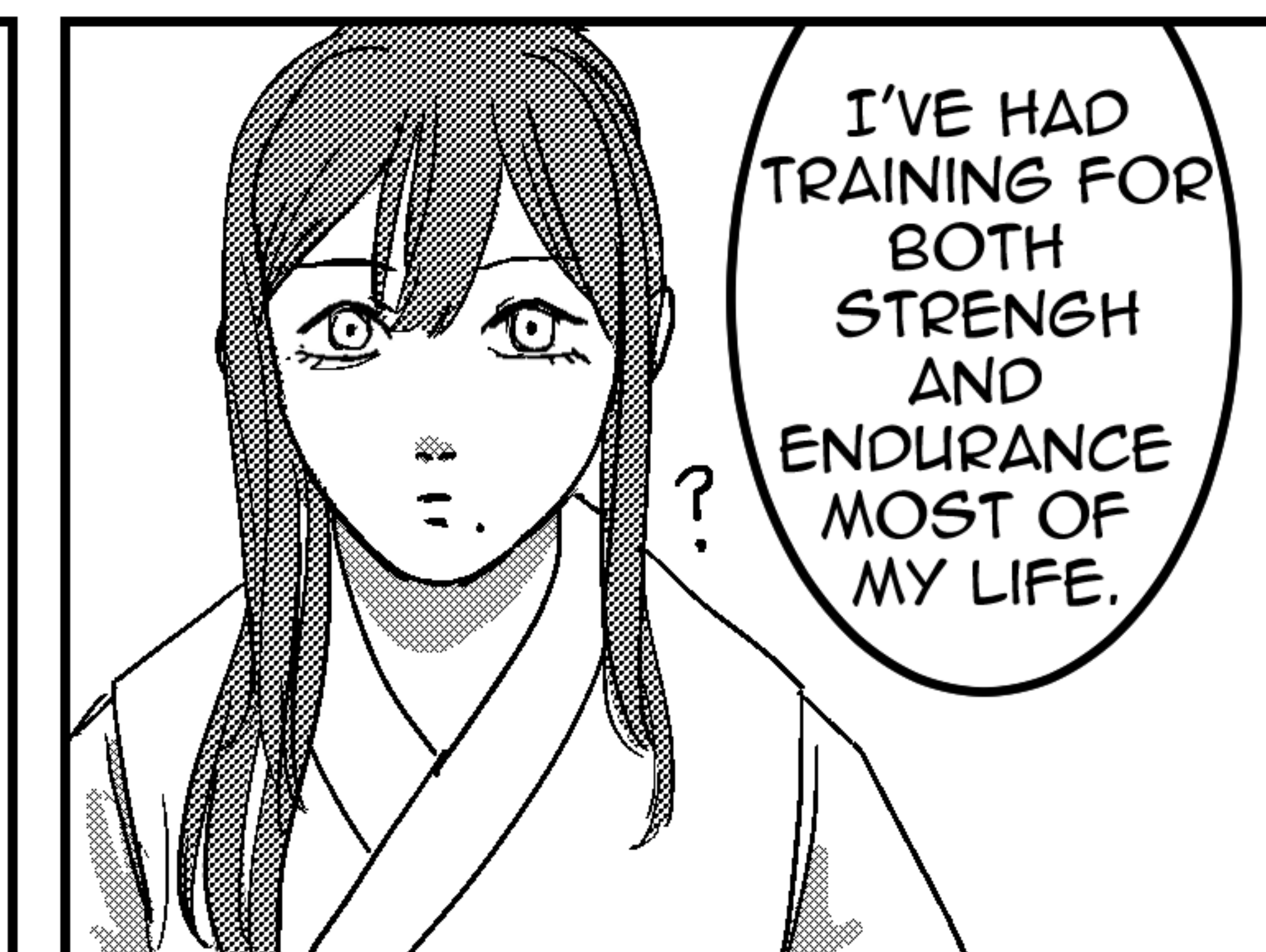


BEFORE WE BEGIN, HAVE YOU EVER PRACTICED ANY FORM OF MARTIAL ARTS?



THERE WERE TIMES WHEN I HAD TO FIGHT TOO.

OH, LIKE SPARRING!



I'VE HAD TRAINING FOR BOTH STRENGTH AND ENDURANCE MOST OF MY LIFE.

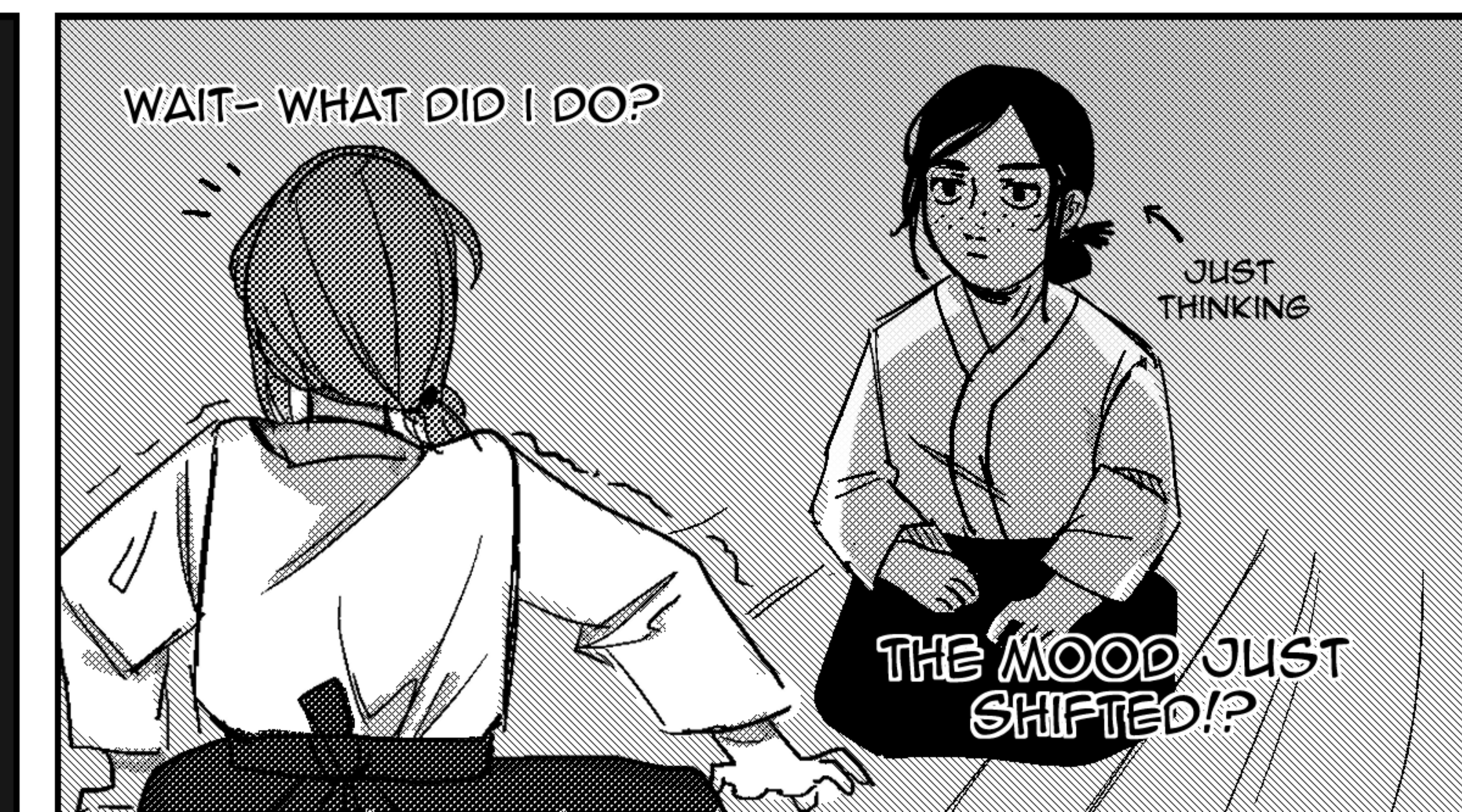


SPARRING? IS SHE INVITING ME TO SPAR?

CHABASHIRA'S SO COOL...

I'LL HAVE TO DO MY BEST!

THE END.



WAIT- WHAT DID I DO?

JUST THINKING

THE MOOD JUST SHIFTED!?

the place we meet is violence

by Hedge

There were several advantages to taking the bus. As she explained to Kirigiri, it was cheap and easy to trace. Even more importantly, it probably wasn't a good idea to let a famous detective be seen wandering around this part of town. People might draw inopportune conclusions about what she was doing.

Something Mukuro hadn't mentioned, though she personally considered it a benefit, was that they couldn't talk about their mission. Most people would be less than thrilled to know they were in the vicinity of an arms dealer, and those who already knew weren't interested in letting the word spread. Given that Kirigiri was laser-focused on her work and Mukuro had never figured out how to start a casual conversation, it made for a quiet trip.

She pulled the cord to stop the bus outside a block of unremarkable-looking office buildings. Kirigiri caught her gaze but didn't say anything until they were on the sidewalk and the only people in sight. "This is it?"

"Yes." Mukuro fixed her gaze on the building that, if Kirigiri's deductions were accurate (and when weren't they?), contained the model of gun that had been used to commit the murder, if not the exact weapon itself.

Honestly, Mukuro didn't come to places like this very often. Hope's Peak had gotten dispensation to maintain a collection of firearms for her to practice her talent, and anyway, she'd already smuggled her own guns into the country before the entrance ceremony. Still, it was good to keep an eye on the market, if only to know what she might be up against someday, and it was close enough to Hope's Peak to be convenient.

She pressed the buzzer for one of the unlabeled offices and waited for the gruff, "Yes?" that came through the speaker.

"Ikusaba Mukuro," she said. She'd never memorized any of the constantly-changing passwords that the gangs used. Why bother when her reputation spoke for her?

There was a pause as the unlucky security guard checked the security cameras. "...Of course, Ikusaba-sama."

Mukuro held the door for Kirigiri mostly out of habit. Kirigiri raised an eyebrow. "You're the one who knows where we're going," she pointed out.

Mukuro shrugged. “You’re the one we’re here for. I’m just here to open doors.”

She kept a straight face as Kirigiri shot her an aggravated look. The best way to get away with making dumb jokes was to pretend you weren’t making them.

She led her to an office on the third floor, where the receptionist took one look at Kirigiri and paled. “We’re here on business,” Mukuro said.

The receptionist visibly thought the better of saying anything about that.

“Takeda-san will be right out.” He bowed and vanished into the back room.

“This all seems remarkably mundane,” Kirigiri said.

“Of course,” Mukuro said, eyes on the stack of manga sitting behind the desk.

“That’s the whole point. You can’t go around advertising that you’re part of the black market.”

“Well, yes.” Kirigiri sounded faintly exasperated. “But I would have expected something more once you made it past the security. This is just like every waiting room I’ve ever been in.”

“Killers aren’t that different from everyone else,” Mukuro pointed out. “We have to go through the same tedium as you do, even in our professional lives.”

“Assuming you don’t simply get bored and murder everyone in line ahead of you.” Kirigiri’s tone was neutral, but Mukuro thought she might have been smiling — or she hoped she was smiling. It would be nice to share a joke with her before ruining their relationship forever.

They sat in (companionable?) silence for maybe five minutes before Takeda appeared. “Good afternoon,” he said. “Ikusaba-sama, you and your... guest are always welcome, of course, but am I right to assume this is the prelude to a greater inquiry by law enforcement?”

Kirigiri’s soft smile might have been reassuring to someone who hadn’t caught the sharpness in her eyes. “Not at all,” she said. “I’m a private detective, which means I’m under no obligation to report any transgressions I encounter during my investigations, particularly those committed by my sources. I’m hoping you’ll fall into that category.”

Takeda sucked his teeth. “I can’t tell you anything about my clients if that’s what you’re after. That would be the end of my business.”

“I understand,” Kirigiri said smoothly. “I was simply hoping to look at your wares to get a sense of their availability. I need to know just how deep the perpetrator’s ties to the criminal underground ran.”

Takeda’s eyes flicked to Mukuro. Mukuro wasn’t good at reassuring, especially to those who didn’t know her, but she made an excellent implacable force.

“Of course,” Takeda said again. “Right this way, then.”

He took them into a room in the back filled with a frankly ludicrous number of firearms. Mukuro suspected most of his clients had their purchases brought to them, but Kirigiri was looking for a general class of weapon rather than anything specific, so it made sense to see the entire collection at once. Besides, they all knew that if Mukuro wanted to kill Takeda, she would do it whether she had access to a gun or not.

Mukuro stood back to let Kirigiri explain the characteristics she was looking for. It was better to let her prove herself so she could make these connections directly. That was her thought, at least, though Kirigiri kept asking Mukuro for confirmation as if she wasn’t intimately familiar with the details of every case she’d ever taken on.

After asking a question that sounded the same as all the others, Kirigiri nodded.

“I think that’s all I need. Thank you, Takeda-san.”

Takeda looked faintly relieved. “I’m glad I was able to assist you, Detective.” He stopped short of suggesting she come back sometime. Mukuro hoped she wouldn’t have to confront him about it. It would be inconvenient to find another weapons dealer.

Moving automatically, Mukuro held the door for Kirigiri once again, offering Takeda a slight nod on her way out. There was a slight spark of amusement in Kirigiri’s eye as she walked past, but she didn’t comment.

It wasn’t until they were outside the building that Kirigiri addressed Mukuro again. “Thank you, Ikusaba-san. This expedition has been very useful for me.”

Mukuro knew it wasn’t her place to ask, but she still found her mouth moving to do so. “Really?” It was a pathetic, cringing question, and Junko would have rightfully laughed at her. This was why she stuck to what she was good at.

Kirigiri nodded like she hadn’t noticed how absurd the question was. “I suspected Takeda-san would show me the most commonplace of his wares first, and for the most part I was right. Pistols, mostly, a revolver or two, weapons I’ve encountered dozens of times before. There was one that stood out to me, though, and I’m pretty

sure that’s the one that was used in the murder. It had a barrel too large for its supposed caliber.”

Mukuro bit her lip to keep herself from expounding on why that could be. “I see,” she said.

Kirigiri raised an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“Well, it could always be designed to be more accommodating of custom ammunition - that would account for the peculiarity of the trajectory, too.” Mukuro blinked. “Or, um. You probably figured that out already.”

“It’s an interesting idea,” Kirigiri said, which did nothing to confirm it one way or the other. Stupid of Mukuro to think her thoughts were worth offering.

“I’m sorry,” she began.

There was a scrape behind her. Shoes moving on pavement, too fast to be anything savory. She shoved Kirigiri to the ground, already whirling to see what it was.

There were three men, one with a bat, the others with knives. The one with the bat was closest, already swinging at the space where Kirigiri had been. Mukuro kicked at his legs, then used the momentum of his fall to wrench the bat from his hands.

She glanced down at Kirigiri. Sensibly, the detective hadn’t tried to get up, and instead simply rearranged herself to a more comfortable sitting position. She looked back to Mukuro expectantly.

That was all the approval Mukuro needed. The men with knives had hesitated on seeing their associate go down. Terribly planning on their part - if they’d come at her while she was still distracted, they would have had better odds. They still wouldn’t have stood a chance, but the complete lack of tactics on their part was insulting. They’d clearly come after Kirigiri, which meant they knew something about Hope’s Peak and its students. That they hadn’t stopped when they saw Mukuro suggested they were either stupid or desperate.

The one on the ground was struggling back to his feet - also stupid, even if he did have a knife. He’d already given Mukuro the range advantage. She slammed his bat right into his solar plexus, ignoring the feeble swing he took at her. When he curled up, gasping for breath, that’s when she bashed his head in.

The sound of the impact jolted the other two into motion. They rushed at her together. Mukuro dropped the bat - dealing with two of them at once, she wouldn’t want to commit to the wide swing she’d need for it to be useful.

The one on the left was clearly less experienced than the one on the right, so Mukuro attacked him first. His confusion at having her suddenly in his space allowed her to get a solid punch to his throat.

His partner hissed out a breath in sympathy. He lashed his knife towards Mukuro's face.

She stepped to the side, avoiding it and bringing her back in close to the man on the left. He was still winded, and moving slowly enough that it was simple for her to duck his frantic stabs before yanking his arm backward. She crunched it neatly against her knee.

He howled, but Mukuro ignored it in favor of grabbing his knife as it fell from his now-useless hand. His partner hesitated then. It was convenient - Mukuro was ready to be done with the fight anyway. She darted forward to stab him neatly in the eye. He fell, and when Mukuro glanced around, it didn't seem like any of their attackers were likely to move anytime soon.

She turned back to Kirigiri, mind still pleasantly free of anything but the mechanics of combat. Even as she waited for orders, a part of her categorized Kirigiri's most likely angle of attack and how best to intercept it.

It was Kirigiri's expression that snapped her out of it. Mukuro was used to Junko's amusement, a commander's calm satisfaction, even the horror of someone who let the pristine Hope's Peak title distract them from the viciousness of what Mukuro truly was. Kirigiri displayed none of them. She did not revel in the violence, but there was an amused glint in her eye, an expert in her own field recognizing another's skill.

Mukuro rubbed her arm. "They might still be alive?" she offered. She winced as one of the men gave a wheeze that cut off abruptly.

"They aren't," Kirigiri said calmly. "We should probably see about getting back to the school before anyone notices them."

"Okay." Mukuro offered Kirigiri a hand up. Only then did she notice the blood smeared across her palm, but Kirigiri took it without hesitation.

Mukuro directed them toward the subway station on autopilot. It was a longer walk than the bus stop, but it wouldn't leave them standing on a street next to a pile of bodies. It wasn't until they were a few blocks away that she worked up the courage to ask. "Aren't you going to have to report this to someone?"

“Don’t be silly. I’m not a police officer, I’m a private detective.” Kirigiri brought a hand to her mouth, but couldn’t quite hide how pleased with herself she looked. “I like solving mysteries. I saw you kill them, so there’s nothing to solve here. I don’t see any reason to get involved.”

Mukuro smiled despite herself. “I see. That does make sense.”

Kirigiri shrugged. “Besides, I’d like to work with you again sometime. It would be a shame if you got tied up in trouble with the law.”

Mukuro’s eyes widened. She’d assumed that this would be a one-time arrangement, a method of last resort that Kirigiri would be eager to put behind her. Then she’d gone and killed some guys in front of her, and while it was for Kirigiri’s sake, that was still the sort of thing that tended to put a damper on any attempt at forming a friendship. There was a reason Mukuro mostly didn’t bother reaching out to people. But if Kirigiri understood what Mukuro was and was willing to spend more time with her anyway...

Mukuro’s smile softened. “I’d like that,” she said.





That’s Ikusaba Mukuro, Alright

by ToxicPineapple

Mukuro studies Rantaro’s profile as he unzips his makeup bag. He’s focused on his task, but he’s wearing the same serene smile as always, a mild thing that barely touches his eyes. As he lays out a large, flat palette on the desk in front of him, he spares a glance at Mukuro, a single eyebrow raising in question.

Blushing, Mukuro looks away. She hadn’t really meant to stare, or for Rantaro to notice.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mukuro catches Rantaro’s smile softening into something more sincere. If she met his eyes again, they’d be warm with reassurance. It’s a look she’s familiar with. She saw it just this morning, in fact, when she finally mustered the courage to ask if he’d be willing to do her makeup for her. The thought of needing that reassurance at all makes Mukuro’s chest crawl, whispers of her sister’s voice itching at the base of her skull, but she squashes both sensations until they’re nothing more than an incoherent hum.

It’s fine. She and Rantaro are friends. Friends do things like this for each other. If Mukuro were any good with a makeup brush, she’d do the same for him.

Oblivious to Mukuro’s internal dispute, Rantaro asks, “Are you nervous? I’ve heard it’s a little intimidating, getting makeup put on for the first time.” He removes several bottles of

clear liquid from the inside of his bag, followed by many, many shades of beiges. Mukuro eyes them warily. *Does he really need that many?*

Oh, but he asked her a question.

“Uh.” Mukuro shifts her weight, smoothing down her skirt. Sometimes her school uniform feels like it doesn’t fit her right, like the folds and creases were meant for someone else, someone prettier and kinder and more graceful than she is. Even Rantaro, with his long, delicate eyelashes and thin, dextrous fingertips, would probably look better in this outfit than she does—would look better in *makeup* than she will.

Yet her stomach flutters with a ticklish, maybe-apprehension maybe-excitement feeling, and as she watches Rantaro line up a row of lipsticks, resolve hardens her stomach. It’s the same resolve—the same insistence that this is who she *is* and that this is what she *wants*—that had led her to ask for this, to begin with.

There’s no real way to put all of *that* into words. Mukuro clears her throat, twirling a strand of hair around her fingers. It’s a habit she picked up after watching Junko do it a couple of times. Initially, she was just curious to see why her sister did it so often, but it’s become more soothing to her now. A way to vent all the nervous energy, something to do with her hands, which she desperately needs on the battlefield, where letting your hands be idle can be dangerous. After all, a twitchy trigger finger means a hasty shot.

It helps her gather her thoughts, at any rate. Mukuro finally manages to meet Rantaro’s gaze again as he’s putting the last of his supplies—a container of wipes, a bag of brushes, and a palette of glittery powder—on the desk.

“Yeah,” she admits. “It is. I mean, I am nervous. And it is intimidating.” She lowers her hand back to her lap and re-smoothes her skirt. “But I’m excited, too. And I tr—”

Mukuro’s voice catches. Junko had called her *naïve* when they first arrived at this school for daring to trust that her classmates had her best interests in mind. She doesn’t want to be that, doesn’t want to make Junko disappointed in her even now—

—but Junko isn’t here. This is *Rantaro’s* room, with its empty white walls and neatly tucked bedsheets, and Rantaro, though eccentric and reckless and sometimes confusing, has never once judged her. Not for wanting to have her makeup done, and not for having faith in people despite everything. She can finish her thought.

“I trust you,” Mukuro repeats firmly. “So it’s fine.”

If Rantaro notices her stumble, he doesn’t comment. He turns back to his supplies and picks up one of the thin beige bottles and a teardrop-shaped sponge. When he faces Mukuro again, materials in hand, there’s a smile on his face.

“I trust you too, Mukuro,” he says simply. “Can I see your hand? We have pretty similar skin tones, but I want to check the concealer before I put anything on you.”

So that’s concealer... Mukuro holds out her hand with a nod and watches closely as Rantaro unscrews the cap, revealing the makeup-coated applicator. Mukuro’s knowledge of makeup and cosmetic terms comes exclusively from Junko, who is known to prattle on endlessly about different looks and styles she has to do for her modelling job. She’d call her understanding of the subject pretty surface level, though, as Junko never seems particularly keen on explaining anything, and in the times that she *has* elaborated on a concept or two, she’s done it in a voice so condescending it made Mukuro not want to ask anymore.

Rantaro has never spoken to her like that, though.

“So...” Mukuro starts, nervous anyway. Rantaro hums in acknowledgement but doesn’t look up, carefully drawing a stripe along Mukuro’s wrist with the concealer. It’s not an exact match—Mukuro can see where the makeup begins and ends—but it’s close to her actual skin tone. Rantaro blends out the edges with his sponge, and when he’s finished, the makeup has almost vanished completely. Mukuro can even see her freckles poking through.

Huh.

Withdrawing her hand, Mukuro asks, “Isn’t the concealer meant to cover things up?” She peers down at her wrist. Up close, she can see it a bit better, the way the shade differs from her skin tone. Rantaro and her both have pretty dark complexions, but Mukuro’s skin

has more of an olive undertone. The difference is slight but distinct once you know how to find it.

“Well, if I was doing a full coverage look, I’d be using foundation, but using a shade of foundation that’s even slightly off can look pretty unnatural. It’s alright for the concealer since I’ll only be using it on your eyelids, but I don’t want to make you look all pink,” Rantaro chuckles.

He wheels his chair closer, gesturing for Mukuro to lean in. Her breath hitches as Rantaro’s fingertips brush her face, but his touch is gentle as he pushes the bangs out of her eyes and tilts her chin upwards.

“This is a light coverage concealer though, anyway. I can rarely find the occasion to do a full runway makeup look, and besides, I like my freckles.” Rantaro grins, putting the sponge and concealer bottle to the side and reaching for one of the bottles with a clear liquid. “I like yours, too.”

It’s a weird thing to say. *I like your freckles*. Who *likes* freckles? Not that Mukuro *hates* her freckles or anything—she’s fairly indifferent to the idea of having freckles—but still, hearing that from Rantaro makes her snort as she watches him squirt some of the clear liquid out onto his hands.

She doesn’t respond right away, mainly because Rantaro takes her by the chin again.

He applies the clear liquid all over her face, on her cheeks and forehead and nose, and even rubs it into her cupid’s bow and the front of her chin. His hands are warm and calloused against her skin, bumpy in places where he has scars. It’s a curious sensation. Mukuro’s own hands are fairly calloused too, but she doesn’t have any scars. Rantaro, meanwhile, is covered in them; some of them that Mukuro has even seen created. She’s half-tempted to snag Rantaro’s hand as he pulls away and run her thumbs over the raised edge of the scars that wrap around his wrists, but she refrains, blinking her eyes open when he’s done and staring at him instead.

“What was that?”

“Moisturiser,” Rantaro replies. He puts the bottle to the side and scoots back over with the concealer bottle and tear-drop sponge in hand. “Makeup and makeup remover dry out your skin, so it’s good to moisturise before you do anything.” He brushes Mukuro’s bangs to the side and gestures for her to close one of her eyes. The applicator glides across her eyelid. Mukuro squirms a little at the feeling and watches Rantaro’s lip curl with her open eye. “Ticklish, huh? Sorry about that.”

Mukuro grumbles as Rantaro puts the bottle to the side and uses his sponge to blend out the concealer like he did on her wrist. “Not really. Just cold.” She pauses, thinking about it, before adding, “Foreign.”

Rantaro hums, his eyes slightly narrowed with concentration. “I can see that. I’ve been having makeup done on me and doing my own makeup since I was a really little kid, so I can’t remember how it feels getting it done for the first time.” He pulls back and picks up the concealer bottle again, waving his hand to let Mukuro know she can open her eye. She does so, blinking a few times to adjust to the strange weight on her eyelid. She could get used to it, she thinks, but *foreign* was definitely the appropriate word to describe this.

“Right,” Mukuro mumbles, perhaps a bit belatedly, as she watches Rantaro dip the applicator in the concealer bottle a few times before leaning forward again. She tilts her face upwards and closes her unpainted eye, watching his face as he applies the concealer. “Your sisters were probably using you as a Barbie doll all the time.” And after a pause, “Junko never had any interest in doing that. When I knew her... she didn’t care about makeup. And then there was Fenrir, and then there was no reason for either of us to be doing each other’s makeup.”

An ache pervades Mukuro as she remembers the way things used to be between her and Junko. Not that they were ever *good*—but when they were kids, it felt like, if nothing else, Junko was happy with who she was and what she was doing. Nowadays, Mukuro can’t even read her well enough to tell.

Rantaro’s gaze on her is sympathetic.

“None of those looks from my sisters were especially something to write home about.” He chuckles, trading out the concealer bottle for his sponge again. “But I liked it, because it made them happy to do... I wish I’d taken some pictures.”

That, at least, Mukuro understands. Even if the makeup looked silly, if Rantaro had photographed those times, he would still have something to remember it by. It’s been so long since he’s seen any of his sisters... Mukuro can only imagine how much he must yearn for the mementos. (Even if she knows, and he must know too, that no matter how many pictures he took, losing his sisters was always going to cut deep.)

“You can always ask them to do your makeup for you again,” Mukuro suggests. Her cheek twitches as Rantaro blends out the concealer, but she manages to keep still. “When you find them, I mean. They’d probably like that.”

Would *Junko* like that? Mukuro lost Junko for a few years before reuniting with her in much the same way as Rantaro probably hopes to do with his own family. If Mukuro asked Junko for a makeover like this—if Mukuro asked Junko for *anything*... Junko would probably laugh her off. She’s nothing like Rantaro, who has steady hands and warm eyes, and a soft, patient smile. She’s nothing like Rantaro’s *sisters*, either, though, at least not from what Mukuro has heard about them. From what Mukuro has heard... Rantaro’s sisters loved him dearly, and they were never afraid to show it. They appreciated everything he did for them. They wanted to be around him all the time.

The idea of that... shouldn't be unfamiliar to Mukuro, nor should she feel so bitter about it. It's not like she's done much to deserve that affection. But the more time she spends with Rantaro, the harder she finds it to believe that she did anything to deserve the disdain, either.

Rantaro puts the sponge down, and Mukuro opens her eye, watching him select the large, flat palette from before. His expression is more troubled now, but it's so subtle that Mukuro can barely differentiate between it and the earlier concentration. She's worried for a moment that she messed up, that Rantaro will be offended, but he smiles when their eyes meet.

He removes a thin brush from his bag and flips the palette open, turning it around for Mukuro to look.

"Choose whatever colours you want," Rantaro says. Softer, he adds, "And thanks, Mukuro. It means a lot that you have so much faith in me."

He's being genuine. Mukuro's a good judge of character, but Rantaro, in particular, she knows how to read. He can lie, sure, but when he's being honest, it shines in every part of him. His shoulders slump and his eyes soften and his voice takes on a determined edge. Mukuro wonders if she, too, is so fundamentally honest, if Junko can see it in her eyes when she's lying.

...She wonders if Rantaro can tell. The idea of him knowing isn't nearly as terrifying.

He's her best friend, after all, and she's never *needed* to lie to him, but even if she did, she knows he wouldn't be upset at her.

"Uh..." Mukuro studies the array. Rantaro's palette has every colour of the rainbow and then some, metallic golds and silvers glittering under the lamplight. Her eyes drift towards the blue.

When Mukuro was little, her father painted her bedroom walls blue. Her bedsheets were blue, and most of her clothes were that colour as well; blues and greys and muddy greens and browns. She's always liked the prettier, more feminine colours, like pink and yellow and red, but she's never felt quite like they suit her. Not like they suit Junko.

Still, blue and slate grey don't really suit Mukuro either.

"I don't know," she admits. Her ears warm. "Would you..."

Rantaro nods without missing a beat. "Sure thing." He turns the palette back to face himself and rests it in his lap, dipping the brush into one of the beiges. "We'll start with a neutral tone, but after that I want to do a purple eye look." His gaze lifts, thoughtful.

"Maybe with gold on the inner corners, but I think purple's your colour."

Is it her colour? Mukuro stares down at the colour in question with her one open eye as Rantaro cups her cheek and gently packs in the eyeshadow. She'd never imagined that she even *had* a colour, but when Rantaro says it so factually, she can't help but believe him.

Purple is... bold, and vibrant. It's the colour of Kirigiri Kyoko's eyes and violet flowers and expensive, rich wines that burn going down your throat. Mukuro has always seen herself as more of a faded grey, or maybe an army green; something designed to fade into the background. Something forgettable and unimportant. Something unworthy of recognition by even her own sister.

Rantaro applies the purple eyeshadow with certainty, though, brushing the excess from her lashes and dabbing sparkling gold in the inner corners of her eyes with a tiny brush. He brushes out her eyelashes with mascara and coats her lip in a translucent gloss with small pieces of purple glitter, and then he leans back, surveying her face.

Under his light, nonjudgmental gaze, Mukuro shifts but doesn't swallow. She meets his eyes, and Rantaro smiles, the broadest, toothiest grin he's ever given her. He's smiling *at* her, for her, a lopsided, earnest smile that she can tell he means with his entire chest, and the intensity of it is so much that Mukuro can feel her heart stuttering against her ribcage.

"Yeah. That's Ikusaba Mukuro, alright," Rantaro says. Mukuro feels her face warming, and Rantaro must see it, because he's chuckling as he fishes a mirror from his supplies and holds it out to her by the handle.

Mukuro accepts it with shaky hands. "Maybe you should have used full coverage."

"What, and have to paint your freckles back on?" Rantaro sounds scandalised. A laugh bubbles out of Mukuro. She runs her fingers up and down the lettering on the back of the mirror before she turns it around in her hands. What a weirdo this guy is.

The moment Mukuro makes eye contact with her reflection, though, she knows that he's right. The purple eyeshadow is lightly applied but brilliant against her grey eyes, and every time she turns her head, the gold in the corners of her eyes catches the light. It's striking. *She's* striking. All of this is *Rantaro's* handiwork, she knows, and a part of her is tempted to thank him for making her look beautiful, but...

Rantaro said *that's Ikusaba Mukuro* when he finished. Even with the mascara and the lipgloss, the pretty eyeshadow, and the concealer beneath it, Mukuro can still see herself in that mirror. If anything, she sees herself better than ever. She can't stop looking.

"That's me," Mukuro breathes out, and she means it as a question, but it doesn't quite come out that way. Rantaro doesn't treat it as such, either, shifting closer and wrapping an

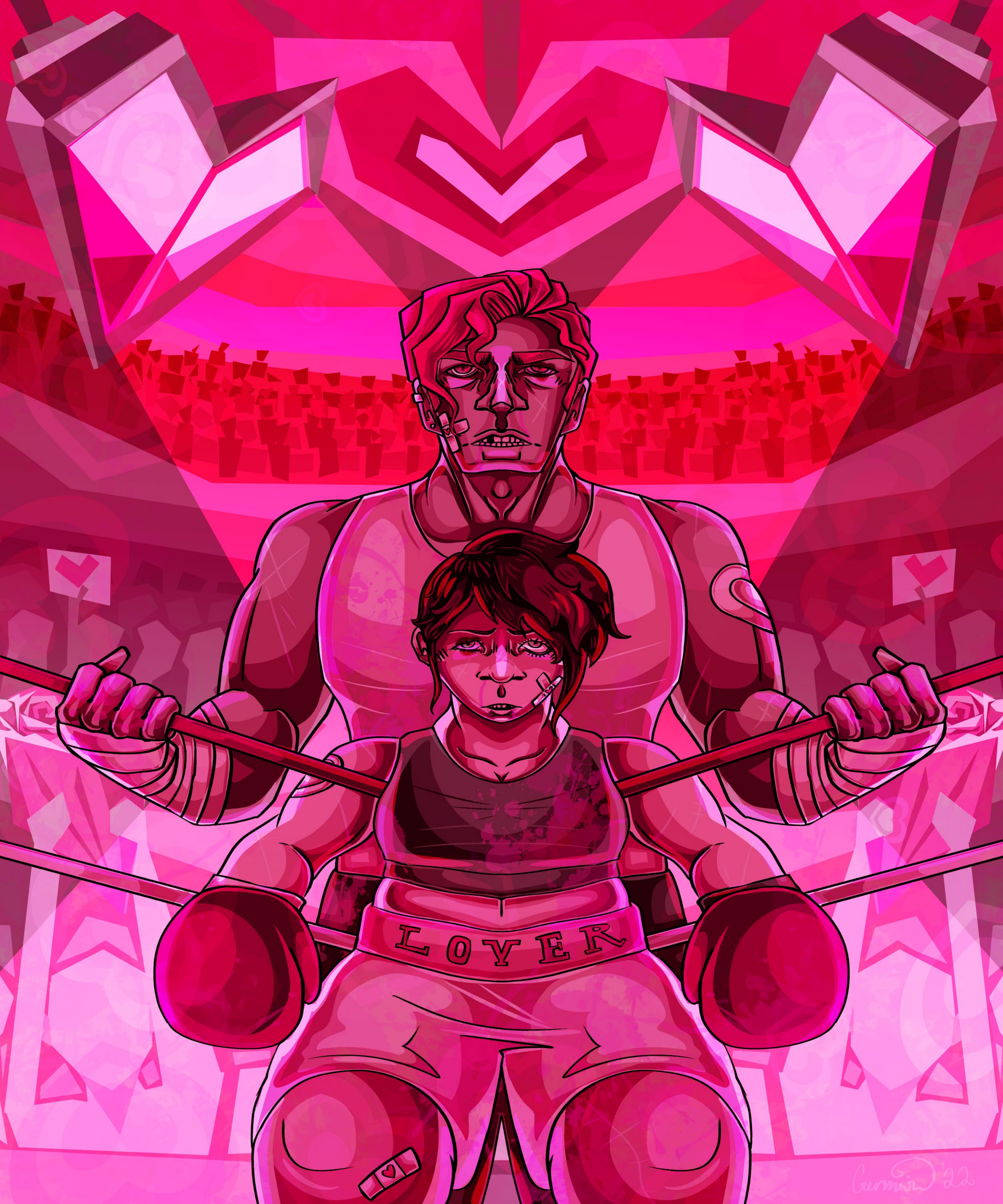
arm around her shoulders. Mukuro watches his face pop up beside hers in the mirror, still with that lopsided, eye-crinkling grin.

“That’s you,” he agrees. “You like it, then?”

How can he even ask that? Mukuro laughs, and it comes out strangled, but when she continues to laugh, her throat relaxes, bubbly giggles spilling out of her until she’s breathless. She leans her cheek into Rantaro’s shoulder and lets herself relax against him, absorbing the warmth of his embrace while she stares into her own eyes through the glass.

“Yeah, Rantaro.” Mukuro lowers the mirror into her lap and closes her eyes, trying to memorise this feeling. “I like it.”





Loneliness Cured! Friend Acquired!

By Sunny/Omori

The life of Mukuro Ikusaba wasn't exactly an easy one. Why exactly was visible, but Mukuro kept up a brick wall. They kept to themselves about everything, including any and all emotions and feelings.

If some people thought being the classmate or friend of Junko Enoshima was socially exhausting enough, they should try being *related* to the wild fashionista. Not only that, but Junko wasn't all sunshine and rainbows towards Mukuro. Aside from having to tolerate her chaotic energy, they also had to deal with constant ridiculing. Teasing was one thing, and was a common occurrence between siblings. But being called 'plain boring' over and over and *over*, as well as being insulted on many other meaningless things, didn't fall under 'teasing'. Everyone was aware of this, but confronting Junko herself was the last thing anyone wanted to do. Mukuro genuinely didn't blame them, and they had sadly grown used to it, so they held nothing against anyone.

Like a sponge, Mukuro just took it in stride to the best of their ability. Everyone could tell they were mentally affected by it, but they could only mouth apologies to Mukuro before resuming whatever they were doing. What always made it worse was the fact that the siblings had five out of seven classes together, which didn't help matters at all. As soon as assignments were passed out and everyone was free to work accordingly, Mukuro would

slip their earbuds in and blast metal music as loud as possible. It was impressive that Junko's booming voice would sometimes be neck-in-neck with their music, but it was always aggravating nonetheless. Thankfully, the teachers expressed some sympathy and allowed Mukuro to listen to music, so long as it didn't disturb their classmates (it never did). Otherwise, nothing was done to stop the despairful tormenting.

This was the norm for Mukuro and Junko. And in an almost twisted way, Mukuro believed that was the general norm for any pair of siblings, despite how false said 'norm' truly was. In a way, Mukuro believed they deserved it.

Today was a particularly rough day. Junko showed no mercy with her bullying and literal poking, and it only worsened with every class she and Mukuro had together. And much to Mukuro's dismay, no matter how loud their music was or what playlist they decided to listen to, it didn't quench the internal emotional build-up. But they didn't dare oppose their sister, and they didn't want to burden a school staff member or teacher with their petty issue. So, they stayed silent; they kept their mouth shut and just sucked it up.

The only mercy Mukuro was granted was when they went to the classroom for their literature class. It was one of the few classes they didn't share with Junko, and their teacher was none other than Usami. She taught all sorts of classes at Hope's Peak, and despite her being a magical rabbit girl (how she came to be was still unknown to this day), she made for a wonderful teacher. Too selfless and sweet for her own good, but she was loved by

everyone in the school, especially by her students. Mukuro was grateful to not have to rely on their music during this class; they loved their metal playlists, but they also savored whatever peaceful silence they could get their hands on. However, even with the much needed silence and Usami's enthusiastic attitude, the weight of everything before made it hard to focus on their work. The bell for lunch couldn't have rang sooner, but they let out the hugest sigh of relief once it did.

"Have an amazing lunch, my super duper great students!" Usami waved, brightly smiling as her students stormed out of her classroom. "Remember, if you didn't finish today's assignment, you have until the end of this week to finish it. Don't hesitate to ask for my help if you need it; I'll do my absolute best to help you out. Love love, everyone!"

Mukuro was the last one to leave, bidding their teacher a quick goodbye before exiting. They headed towards their locker to get their packed lunch. They never cared for the lunches served at school. They weren't bad compared to other regular high schools; they just preferred packing what *they* liked and having everything organized. Their locker wasn't a long walk away, and after putting in their combination, they grabbed their lunch and closed their locker, locking it back up. The hallways were eerily bare, but they didn't mind. It gave them the ability to clearly think as they walked to their usual lunch spot: the rooftop.

The rooftop was usually empty, it gave anyone up there a nice view of everything around, and of course, it was quiet. Considering lunch was the ultimate social hour, Junko was always occupied with talking to her friends, leaving Mukuro alone for once. The only downside was that, due to how tall the academy building was, it took a long time to reach the rooftop. They didn't care to walk up multiple flights of stairs, but once an elevator was finally installed, they started using that instead. They didn't get as much exercise, but the time it took to get there was too good to pass up. The elevator music was generic, but Mukuro didn't care. They knew it'd soon be over and they'd be able to eat alone.

Once the elevator doors opened, Mukuro stepped out and was surprised to see their usual spot was occupied. It was Kaito, Maki, Kaede and Shuichi; peers they knew but weren't close to. They initially thought to ask if they could leave, but upon seeing textbooks and scattered papers, they realized they were studying together. They understood why they'd choose the rooftop as a place to eat, bond, *and* study together; it was the perfect spot to do so. They held back and simply went back into the elevator, pressing the button for the first floor. They were slightly disappointed, but it was nothing that a little improvising couldn't fix. They were determined to eat alone.

Once they returned to the first floor, they left the elevator and hummed as they thought about where they could go. The cafeteria was an obvious no-go; they shuddered at the thought of how chaotic it was. There were a few outdoor benches around the school,

but they knew those were occupied by other students by now. And while they wouldn't favor eating in a classroom (especially one with a teacher silently sitting at their desk), that was still an option; an option Mukuro didn't feel like choosing. Besides, they were probably occupied with students who - just like them - wanted to eat alone. This left them with one last option: the restroom. It was cramped and sometimes smelly, but during lunchtime, there wasn't anyone in there. It was better than nothing, that's for sure.

Swallowing whatever dignity they had left, they hurried off towards the nearest restroom, going in and picking a random stall. Closing and locking the stall door, they sat down on the toilet, lunch in their lap. Taking a deep breath, they figured the restroom must've been recently cleaned, as it smelled of lemons. They were glad their appetite wouldn't be spoiled due to foul odors. At last, they could eat in complete solitude. No snobbish sister, no bystanding classmates, no abrupt noise, nothing. To them, it was hard to imagine them hanging around with friends of any kind; forming and keeping friendships wasn't their forte. It didn't bother them as much as time passed by, but they still felt that hole in their heart, especially with the weight of today's 'lovely' events.

"Another day, another lonely lunch..." Mukuro mumbled as they unpacked their lunch, pulling out a plain bologna sandwich in a sandwich bag. They took the sandwich out of the bag, and began to slowly eat it.

For a few moments, they zoned out and let the mind drift. They paid no mind to anything other than the fuzziness in their mind until they heard a soft, firm knock on their stall door. Assuming it was a stupid classmate, they didn't respond, hoping the person on the other side would go to another stall, or another restroom for that matter. They weren't in the mood for chit-chat. Period.

Then the other person knocked again. Mukuro opened their mouth to shoo them off, but they were interrupted by a gentle voice saying: "Mukuro? I'm sorry if you're actually going potty, but I just wanna make sure it's you in there!"

"Usami?" Mukuro inquired.

"The one and only! And it *is* you! Yay! You have no idea how happy I am to know you're safe and sound. How are you, my star pupil?"

"I'm... neutral. It's simply another day at Hope's Peak. How are you, Miss Usami?"

"I am feeling absolutely, positively splendid! Classes have been going well, everyone's smiling and working in perfect harmony, and I packed the yummiest lunch ever. However, I didn't wanna start eating right away; I wanted to check in on you first."

"May I ask what your reasoning for that is?"

"Uwah, I was super duper worried about you. You say you're feeling okay, and I'm sorry if I sound rude for what I'm about to say next, but I think you're fibbing 'cause I could tell something was on your mind. During class, you looked... sad. And seeing any of my

dearest students sad makes me sad," Usami admitted, her ears drooping and her mouth curving into a frown. "Is something wrong, Mukuro? Did something happen?"

"No," Mukuro answered. "Nothing happened, Miss Usami. I can confidently assure you that everything is well on my personal end. You're worrying over nothing here."

"Are you sure? If you're having a bad day, then you can always tell me. I want to help my fellow students however I possibly can, no matter what. I may be some magical rabbit girl, but my love for all of Hope's Peak students, including you, goes to the moon, then to Saturn, then to Mars, then to every other planet and star and back! I mean every single word from the bottom of my stubby feet, to the tippy-top of my floppy bunny ears."

Mukuro couldn't help but snicker.

"Did I say something funny?" Usami asked, genuinely curious as to what Mukuro was snickering about.

"You truly are something else. Has anyone ever told you that you sound so dramatic at times?" Mukuro questioned, taking another bite of their sandwich.

"Y'know what? Some people *have* told me that. It doesn't offend me though; it only shows just how glittery and colorful my personality and attitude is, tee-hee! So I mean it when I say: Thank you for the compliment, Mukuro."

"Heh, no problem."

They both went quiet, but only for a quick moment before Usami spoke up again and asked: "Would you like a juice box, Mukuro?"

"I beg your pardon?" The random question caught Mukuro off guard.

"Would you like a juicebox?" Usami repeated. "I understand if you already have something to drink or don't want one, but I brought one just in case! Everyone loves juice boxes, and if it brings out even a tiny smile from ya, then I'm satisfied."

"Hm, no, but thank you."

"Aw, are you sure? I have plenty of 'em, so if you're worried about me running out or something, then worry no more!"

"... What kind is it?"

"Well, I wasn't sure what kind you like or don't like, so I went with one that I think you might enjoy. I think. Here I have with me is a fresh, cold, yummy-in-your-tummy cranberry-grape juice box!"

Mukuro hummed as they thought about it, before replying with: "... Sure, I'll take it."

"Hip-hip-hooray! One cranberry-grape juice box, coming right up!" Usami slid the juice box under the stall door, the juice box halting to a stop once it hit Mukuro's feet. "I hope you like it!"

"It sounds interesting. Better to try it before you knock it, as some say," Mukuro took the plastic straw off of the side of the juice box, punctured the hole with it and took a sip.

The bittersweet, slightly tart flavor was a surprise, but a welcoming one. Mukuro made a mental note to buy some of their own cranberry-grape juice in the near future.

“Do you like it?”

“I do. Thank you, Miss Usami.”

“Yay! You’re super duper welcome. Now listen,” Usami’s tone shifted to a mix of seriousness and concern, but it was still gentle-sounding. “I... I understand if you truly don’t wanna talk about anything. As much as I want to help my students, as a teacher and caretaker, one of my vows is to respect personal space and boundaries. If you wanna talk about your bad day and why you’re having it, then I’m all ears. But if you don’t, then that’s a-okay. It really is! I just want you to know that you can always talk to me about anything. I will always be there for you, through thick and thin. In the name of the moon, I will support you!”

Mukuro held back another snicker this time. They bit their bottom lip, contemplating on what they should say now. Usami was their teacher; teachers weren’t exactly known for allowing and hearing their students vent to them about whatever’s going on. But Usami really was unique in the best way possible. It was truthful for Usami to also call herself a ‘caretaker’, because she really was one. She treated her students almost like her own children; she treated them with the love and understanding of a mother. She supposed that,

if she could or had to vent to anyone in the world, it would be the magical girl rabbit who’s also her teacher.

They never thought they’d end up in this kind of predicament, but they also thought they’d never end up eating lunch alone in a restroom stall. Life really is unpredictable.

Mukuro cleared their throat, bouncing one of their legs up-and-down. “I’m certain you’re aware of my sister and how... rambunctious she can be. Am I correct?”

“Yup yup, I sure am! She’s definitely one-in-a-million. It’s only a problem when she disrupts my lessons and stunts the others from learning and working, which is... most of the time,” Usami said, heavy-hearted. “Did she do or say something to you?”

“Heh, when does she *not* say something to me? Today was just particularly harsh. She’s got quite the sharp tongue on her; they’re as sharp as her ridiculous acrylics. Something about everything she insulted me on today just got to me, I suppose. I never say or do anything about it though. There’s nothing I *can* do or say. In a way only I seem to understand, it makes me mentally and emotionally tougher. After all, sergeants are *way* worse than her. But today kind of shows that I might turn out to make for one weak soldier.”

“Mukuro! I will *not* stand by bullying or self-deprecating of any kind! I’m so sorry. I had no idea about this. Believe me, if I did, I would’ve done something by now! You’re a wonderful, fantastic human being, and I’m grateful to have you as my student. Junko

doesn't have any right to be a meaniehead, but I'm sure she already knows that. I'd be more than willing to discuss a plan on how to resolve this and cease the bullying, but could we please do so in my classroom? I don't think a restroom is the most appropriate place for a serious talk."

"I mean--"

"Don't worry, you can eat lunch with me there, too! We can be lunch buddies and even trade snacks! Nobody should ever have to eat alone. We all need alone time to think, but when we're having rain clouds over our head, spending time with someone can sometimes help. Pretty please, will you open the stall door and follow me to my classroom? I have more of those juice boxes, if you want any more!"

After taking one last look around their cramped space, Mukuro decided that eating lunch with and talking to their teacher wasn't a terrible idea. There'd be *way* more room. Plus, the promise of more cranberry-grape juice boxes enticed them (they'd never tell Usami though). Packing their lunch away and standing up, they unlocked and opened their stall door.

"Sure, fine, I'll budge," Mukuro said, admitting defeat.

"Yippee! Before we go though, I have a *tiny* question for you," Usami mentioned.

"Okay, shoot."

"Are you okay with hugs?"

"For the most part, I'm not. I'm only comfortable with hugs from those I deeply trust and feel safe around. As such, considering I know it'll be your next question: Yes, you can give me a hug. Let's just hope Junko doesn't find out and start some sh--"

"Hooray for hug time!" Usami cheered as she hopped up and gave Mukuro the best hug her stubby arms could manage. Considering Usami's small size, the most Mukuro could do was awkwardly pat Usami on the back. Funny enough, despite her size, Mukuro found Usami's hug to be just as soft and warm as her. "Alrighty, let's get to my classroom so that way we can munch-munch and talk away! Are you ready?"

"Yeah, I think so. Actually, no, I know I'm ready. Let's get going, hm?"

Hopping back onto the floor, Usami led Mukuro back to her classroom. Mukuro was unsure how the rest of their lunch would go, but they were unsure about a lot of things. This time though, they were going to do something; one of their many problems was going to get resolved, slowly but surely.

For the very first time in their life, Mukuro felt hope. Sparkling, authentic hope.







the losing fight against asahina

by Lichmutual

Ikusaba Mukuro was the Ultimate Soldier. To her, strength was defined by physicality and intelligence; it was based on one’s ability to endure combat, usurping the opponent, or be so confident that one could embody the most poisonous of snakes that roam the deserts and strike when the opportunity was perfect for the grand feast. After all, the strongest challenger is the one who ultimately wins – and that is what she had been trained to be, the final soldier on the battlefield once everything had been done.

There were fights she could not win though.

“Mukuro!”

Mukuro pauses, frozen like a deer to oncoming headlights. Her grip on the books she was stuffing into her bag goes limp.

“...Asahina,” she greets after a pause, gray eyes casting over the figure of her classmate Asahina Aoi.

“I *told* you to call me Hina!” the Ultimate Swimming Pro corrects, a pout briefly overcoming her bright features that disappears as fast as the wind could blow clouds.

“Hina.” Mukuro coughs to herself after, slowly returning to her movements of figuring out the puzzle that is her belongings and how they will all fit neatly inside her bag.

The Ultimate Soldier can feel how the other girl’s eyes glance over her figure to her actions, humming out her contemplativeness until –

“Do you need help?”

Reaching forward, Hina’s hands brush against dry, freckled skin. The contact alone makes Mukuro freeze up, releasing control as the other girl manages to finish the task with speed though not without ease.

“Jeez, you carry so much around! You should lighten up your load! Do you, like, *really* need all these...” Hina holds up a bag of empty bullet shells, frowning. “What even are these?”

Mukuro has the shame in her to feel her cheeks begin to flush. “...Those are empty shells from my guns.”

“*Aaand* why do you have them?”

The Ultimate Soldier hesitates.

“...Couldn’t find anywhere to dispose of them.”

Hina huffs. “Well! I know where they can go!”

Mukuro watches the other girl toss them into the classroom trash can with confidence and force the soldier only could muster on the battlefield — a *real* battlefield, not... whatever this was.

“If you ever need help again, just say the words! Okay, Mukuro?”

Hina places a friendly hand on her peer’s shoulder and gives her a closed-eyed, large grin.

It’s not something Mukuro is used to.

Her sister was never one for kind words — only when she needed something and didn’t want to do the heavy work herself. Growing up, that had been making Mukuro the brawn to her brains, someone that only listened and engaged with orders given to her. From petty thievery to feed themselves to bullying other helpless children in the schoolyard... Mukuro had never considered herself a kind person to begin with, so receiving such kindness from someone else was something she had never allowed herself to think about.

Yet, here was a challenger. Asahina Aoi stood as her opponent in a battlefield known as social interaction.

What even *made* for a good conversation?

Mukuro finds herself watching people — her peers pass by her as she sits out in the fields on her own with her lunch. Being alone was easier, with her back to a tree to protect her from an ambush and ease years' worth of anxiety she gained from her experiences. There were varying degrees of conversation she witnessed: some pleasant, some

argumentative, and *something* about “Dark Devas” and destruction that made her quirk her eyebrows at an upperclassman passing by.

None of it made much sense to her. Junko had been the only person she needed to talk to. For her parents, Mukuro had been the perfect, quiet eldest daughter that would be a dream to have — until she had run away, that is, but that was a part of life, wasn’t it? To change and morph the mold you existed in is what they were told in school.

So why was this confusing her? What part of the challenge stumped her?

Mukuro frowns to herself, stabbing at the grilled fish and rice bed in her lunch box and shoveling it up into her mouth with her chopsticks. Her meals were basic and filled with protein, as that was all she needed —

“Mukuro!”

The Ultimate Soldier is caught off guard at the sound of Hina’s voice calling to her, barely missing choking on her meal as she coughs.

Her peer approaches with a large grin painting her features. When Mukuro takes in the scenery, she spots fellow classmate Ogami in the distance, arms crossed and watching the two of them carefully. Being considered untrustworthy wasn’t a new concept to Mukuro, so she merely makes note of the presence and tucks the observation away as her eyes return to Hina.

“Asa...” Mukuro pauses to correct herself. “Hina. Did you need something?”

“Nope!” the other girl replies, though she stops in her tracks as a thoughtful look crosses her features. As her closed fist moves to rest against her hip, Mukuro realizes she’s holding a brown paper bag in her grip that she had missed on her initial overview. “Actually! I *guess* I do!”

Mukuro doesn’t speak, waiting for Hina to continue talking... and then she realizes that the follow-up won’t ever come unless she prompts.

“What is it?” the soldier asks, trying to keep the annoyance out of her flat tone as best as she can. Guessing games and mind games already took up far too much of her time, especially in Junko’s company, so a clear answer of her objective was always for the best —

“Do you want my leftover doughnuts?”

Mukuro wonders if this is what a good punch to the stomach feels like, to have the wind so thoroughly stolen from her in a matter of seconds over a few words.

“The shop gave me some extras ‘cause I order from them so much! But, like, I’m not really a fan of the out-there flavors,” Hina explains, bending over so she can open the bag in her hands and show Mukuro the contents. Sure enough, there are two doughnuts: one with bright yellow frosting and a blue tinge to the dough and another with a soft reddish pink color to both aspects. “One is lemon-blueberry I think? The other is definitely strawberry though!”

All of Mukuro’s survival instincts told her *absolutely not*. It was unheard of to accept food from a stranger; the food could be tampered with and result in some worst-case scenarios.

“...Sure.”

What am I even saying?

“Sweet!” Hina grins as she pushes the bag closer to Mukuro, forcing her to take it and accept the gift without any room to back out.

The Ultimate Soldier opens her mouth, words forming in her mind that she *should* say – something polite and proper after someone gives her something.

“...Thank you.”

Her unsure tone is paved over by Hina’s jovial attitude.

“Oh, no, no – *I* should be thanking *you*! Good doughnuts shouldn’t go to waste!” the Ultimate Swimming Pro explains. It’s not a sentiment that Mukuro understands to the extent she figures Hina means it, but food going to waste wasn’t something she would have wanted either. After all, rations were precious and few and far between amongst large groups of people.

As Hina dismisses herself, she reaches over to ruffle Mukuro’s hair. The action makes the soldier’s skin form bumps – if the interaction between the two hadn’t been weird enough to her as is, that would have been the final bullet in the target at the bull’s eye. Just

watching her classmate leave doesn't take her off the edge until she watches Hina and Ogami leave her vision, just as the rest of the other students had done passing her by earlier.

Returning to the bag in front of her, Mukuro frowns as she opens it once again. The sweet smell hits instantly upon uncovering the treats, unmistakable and most likely giving her position away to anyone with a decently functioning nose. It only serves to make her face scrunch up more.

Mukuro ate a lot of plain foods. If she were lucky, acquiring something hot and savory would be a special treat to her tastebuds. That was a luxury, though, not a basic necessity to simply eat for stamina and nutrients.

The blue and yellow one stains her fingers as she picks it up, examining it carefully. It... *looked* fine. The only tampering done to it was from the way the frosting stuck to her fingers at the mere disturbance of it, creating a bigger mess than she had thought she would need to deal with.

Whatever. She said she would eat it, yeah? Food is just food.

Mukuro still has to force herself to take a bite though. What even was this feeling of uncertainty in her? It was the same feeling she got around her sister occasionally but to a lesser extent – just the idea of the unknown looming over her as she makes a choice.

The doughnut tasted fine, though. There was no big secret she wasn't in on until the big reveal. As Hina described, it was a blueberry doughnut with lemon frosting, exploding with flavor to the otherwise bland palette Mukuro had.

Relief makes Mukuro's shoulders slump. She hadn't even realized she was stressed, to begin with. Just what sort of game was Hina playing here?

...Perhaps, she was overthinking this.

The only person who had ever given her genuine reason to question motives was her own sister; after all, *games* were ways of getting things Junko wanted. Mukuro was an extension that justified the end, always a tool that helped the cogs in the machine rotate as they should to create the full picture. Mukuro only won at the end of the day when she did as Junko said; after all, that was how it had always been all her life.

Junko was not a part of this equation though. It was Mukuro, Hina, and the unknown variable that was the outcome of this.

The Ultimate Soldier finds herself standing at the entrance to the indoor swimming pool after a week of turmoil. There *had* to be an answer somewhere that she wasn't seeing.

Finding her courage, Mukuro pushes open the doors, keen hearing picking up on the echo that rings out through the large building as she does. The only other sound that can be heard is that of sloshing water from someone swimming through it, belonging to none other than –

“Mukuro!” Hina greets as she pops up from the water, out of breath and waving her hand wildly. Water droplets spray out everywhere in her presence, littering the tile flooring near the edges of the pool.

“Hina,” the soldier greets in turn, dipping her head politely. When she straightens up, she finds the words dying on her tongue that she wanted to say, and so instead she's standing there awkwardly at the entrance and staring. Great.

“Didcha need something?” the swimmer questions, moving to haul herself out of the pool as she speaks.

“I did,” Mukuro answers in turn, providing a nod of her head to prolong even more the inevitable.

“Well?” Hina prompts as she raises to her feet. Putting her hands on her hips, she provides a bright and cheery smile. “We're friends! Spill it!”

Friends.

The Ultimate Soldier isn't used to that kind of terminology.

“I –” Mukuro coughs, recollecting herself. It felt like Hina delivered a swift punch to her gut that took the air out of her all with just her words. “I wanted to ask if you would like to rendezvous at some point to exchange training tips.”

Hina blinks. “Oh! You want to, like, hang out?”

“...Yes,” Mukuro clarifies, bringing a hand up to push back the strands of hair framing her face. She briefly wonders if that wasn’t how she was supposed to ask, unsure of how *to* even ask, but her classmate offers a bubbly laugh.

“Oh! We can right now! I have loads of free time!”

“We don’t have to right now —”

Mukuro’s words are lost on Hina as she’s already grabbing her towel and moving to take Mukuro by the arm. The soldier can still tell she hadn’t dried off properly at all which was the only thing distracting her from the contact.

“Hina – My clothes are getting wet —”

“Oh! Sorry ‘bout that! I’m not used to, like, people showing up while I’m training!”

A laugh escapes Mukuro’s lips before she even realizes the noise she’s made.

“It’s alright,” the soldier reassures, coughing into her free hand afterward to hide the small smile decorating her features.

Truth be told, Ikusaba Mukuro had already accepted her loss in this game with Asahina Aoi with grace. After all, it meant she was allowed to learn from her missteps and look toward someone else for a change whom she trusted to guide her in the right direction.





Just Like Junko! Top Ten Beauty Tips for a Hot New You 💖

by Birdie

“You look nothing like her,” says Peko, voice flat and unimpressed. She sits cross-legged on Mukuro’s bed, staring at her friend.

Any other time, Mukuro would’ve shrugged off the criticism, but in the spirit of her performance, she twists her face into an exaggerated scowl.

“Fucking rude,” she says, putting a bite in her words she doesn’t really feel. “We’re literally twins.”

“Fraternal,” Peko responds. When Mukuro only glares in response, she adds, “Your eyes are too small. You’re wearing too much makeup. You look nothing like her.”

Mukuro pulls off the wig in frustration and sits down on the bed. She stares at her lap for a moment, balling sheets up into a squeezed fist, before finally muttering, “It’s not like I can do much about my eyes.”

Peko doesn’t speak. She runs her fingers through Mukuro’s hair, smoothing it down. It’d gotten sweaty under the wig, and with the cap torn off, it’s sticking up in odd directions. She looks like a drowned rat—

No, a drowned rat wouldn’t be wearing nearly this much mascara.

Peko stands up and roots through the gaudy pink bag of nonsense Junko left.

Colorful cosmetics, soft creams that smell like flowers. It sticks out like a sore thumb in the utilitarian room, though Peko touches everything in it as if it were a live grenade. Mukuro watches. It was only natural to ask Peko, her perpetual sparring partner, to help with this. Being Junko Enoshima was more stressful than any warzone she’d ever been in, a more delicate dance. She needed a familiar ally in uncharted territory.

Like most things Peko did, she didn’t appear too enthusiastic about her role as an acting coach, but played it regardless. In three weeks she hadn’t had a single positive note about Mukuro’s performance. Today, the problem was too much makeup. Yesterday, the wig wasn’t teased enough. Tomorrow it’ll be something else.

For Mukuro, who prides herself in clean perfection, in doing the job right the first time, this continual failure is endlessly frustrating. (Doubly so, when the only other thing she has to be proud of is being the person closest to possibly understanding Junko Enoshima, but that’s not something she’ll admit to anyone, even Peko.)

This is what practice is for. Much to Junko’s irritation, Mukuro is not her sister. They’ll sit in this room and Mukuro will parade around in a short skirt and a push-up bra until she gets it right.

Not tonight, though. Peko finds the makeup remover wipes she was looking for and sits back down. She brings it up to Mukuro’s face, a few centimeters away, then pauses. A question. Mukuro nods. They’ve been at it for hours. Her Junko impression isn’t going to improve through military repetition.

She allows Peko to clean her face. It’s strange to be touched like this. It feels like a strange parody of the kinds of sleepovers she was never invited to as a child, what normal girls are supposed to do in their bedrooms. There’s a carefulness to Peko’s hand, wiping makeup from her friend’s eyes, that you could almost mistake for tenderness if you didn’t know her.

The room is silent for the few minutes it takes Peko to clean the last few smears of black away from Mukuro’s eyes. When she finishes, they just sit, faces close enough to feel each other’s breath on their faces.

There’s a distance neither knows how to close.

There’s a reason Peko doesn’t find her impression convincing.

It’s Mukuro that blinks first. She can’t read Peko’s face and it’s unnerving—usually it’s a carefully controlled blankness, the picture of control, but now there’s *something* there, something that she can’t identify. Instead of trying, she shrinks back.

“We could go to the dojo,” offers Peko. A mercy.

Mukuro doesn’t hesitate.



Steel clashes steel. They’d started sparring with a shinai and dense rubber casting of a hunting knife, but got bored and switched to live steel once Peko had gotten more... involved with her sister. They were both skilled enough that the risk of killing each other was fairly low, but the possibility of it, however slim, got the blood flowing.

(Junko had that effect on people.)

It’s a strange duel, the exacting precision of a highly trained kendoka against the messy intimacy of guerrilla warfare, but somehow they’ve found each other

complementary partners. For Mukuro, it forces her to keep pace with someone keeping such tight command of the room, there's not room for a single flinch. For Peko, it reminds her what combat is like beyond the clean confines of a dojo. For both, it's simply refreshing not to wipe the floor with their sparring partner the moment they begin.

The sword parry breaks in Mukuro's favor, her endurance finally beating out Peko's grip strength. She takes the opportunity to close what small distance there was between them. Peko could slice Mukuro to ribbons from arms length before either of them blink, but any closer in and the katana becomes unwieldy. Peko steps backwards, light on her feet, but her sword swipes are awkward and Mukuro dives between them without breaking a sweat. She's relying entirely on footwork to retake the distance she needs. Deft as Peko may be, she can't outmaneuver someone used to dodging bullets when they're at point blank range. Besides, she can't keep backing up forever. Eventually they'll hit the wall of the dojo, and Peko will be trapped.

Still, a victory by simply cornering her would be cheap, Mukuro thinks, so she keeps looking for openings. She thinks she's finally found it, a sword gripped just a bit too low, her shoulder unguarded (a strike there would be disabling, unlikely to be fatal) when a kick hits the center of her chest hard enough to knock her backward.

She hits the ground hard on her elbows. Peko doesn't usually fight like that.

Real fights don't have strike zones, and no one but you cares about honor.

Mukuro had told Peko that once, after she'd lost a match to a sucker punch and let her irritation betray her.

The advice made the kendoka sound more naïve than she was. Their friendship was based on a body count they both knew better than to refer to directly. The "honor" Peko knew came from a teacher that would break her bones on a bamboo sword doing a perfectly legal kendo move and still expect her at practice the next day. Still, for as bloody as they were, the yakuza had some odd ideas about how politely you were supposed to murder someone.

There was nothing polite about that kick— it was all frustration and power, and by the time Mukuro's breath returns, she's found it in her to be impressed. She nods and lets Peko help her up as an admission of defeat.

"You're fighting like me," Mukuro offers.

Peko shrugs, not looking at her. "I was distracted."



Mukuro tries to practice on her own one day, but it goes even worse. She feels silly pacing around her dorm room, talking to herself about nothing. She tries monologuing at her reflection, but she can't stand to look at herself in the mirror long enough to understand why that is. Finally she gives up, and just sits dejectedly on her bed, still in costume. Her blank stare into nothing is interrupted by the sound of her door lock turning. She jumps, trying to come back to herself fast enough that it doesn't become a *thing*, but her sister always knows when she's been sulking.

(Even before the door opens, it couldn't be anyone else. The first thing Mukuro had done upon moving into her dorm was hand her sister the key. She'd told the school administrators she lost it and needed a new one. They didn't ask questions.)

"Stewing in your own misery without me?" she asks, over exaggerated and dramatic. It feels like she's raised the humidity level of the room just by being in it.

"You should've texted me! I don't want to miss the fun."

She plops herself next to Mukuro, who doesn't react, and leans in as if studying the way sadness sits on her sister's stoic face. There's a second of quiet contemplation before she lets out a hyena cackle.

"Oh my god, your eyes. If you get the wings crooked you need to actually *wipe them off*, not just add more. You look like a fucking raccoon."

Mukuro sinks deeper into the mattress.

"Did you even read the mags I left? Gal makeup's supposed to brighten your eyes, not fucking drown them."

"I-I'll keep practicing." Stammering doesn't fit well in her voice. She's supposed to be steady. Then again, Junko delights in knocking her off kilter.

This time when she laughs, it's like a bell, but somehow no kinder. "Aww, Mook." She licks her finger and starts rearranging strands of plastic hair. "I know you're gonna do your best, but I'm hiding all the pictures of me for a reason."



Their last tonight together is going no better than any of the others. Somehow, Peko is more terse than usual. Mukuro finishes an impassioned speech about the optimal skirt length for the modern woman, and all Peko has to say is, "You aren't smiling right."

“I’m smiling like the magazine,” Mukuro argues. To illustrate her point, she holds up a glossy spread up next to her face and strikes a grin.

Peko is unmoved. “She doesn’t smile like that either. Not in real life.”

She’s not wrong. The manic, anglerfish smile that adorned Junko’s face when she was genuinely excited wasn’t even worth practicing. To get that one right, Mukuro would have to file down her teeth. And it is a strange thing, to be acting out a version of her sister she’s never actually met. If she really wanted to be authentic, she’d skip skirt length lectures and tell Peko all the ways she thinks she might die in the next two weeks.

Mukuro looks down at the pages in her hands, a non-threatening gossip mag targeted at middle school girls. Junko Enoshima smiles back, her photo sitting next to an advice column style interview on finding your own individual style.

“These things... they know her from this. This is who they’re expecting,” Mukuro says. She closes the magazine and sets it down, then flashes another grin at Peko. She uses more teeth this time.

“Then why are you asking for my advice?” Peko presses, voice flat and edged with... something. “I don’t read those magazines.”

Mukuro doesn’t have an answer for her, and the subsequent silence is tense. It absolutely does not help when Mukuro finally breaks it with, “Wow, gloomy much! I’m just looking for a little girl-to-girl advice, jeez.”

It sounds even more forced than usual. Peko quirks a brow, unimpressed. Mukuro breaks character immediately.

“You were right about the makeup,” she offers, a desperate peace offering, trying to get through the wall Peko’s put up. This isn’t working. “Junko helped me this time. To get the wing thinner. It should be right.”

“How is that supposed to help?” asks Peko. “She won’t be there to do it for you. You’re going to have to do it alone.”

Again, Mukuro has no answer, because of course Peko’s right, the whole point of this is learning to do it on her own, but— but she’s also thinking about sitting on the bed, eyes closed, chin tilted up by the gentle hand of her twin, feeling plastic nails run along her jaw without the hint of violence. How she didn’t flinch even when the foam tip of the liner brush was dragged across her eyelashes. Maybe she should’ve, blind and helpless under the hand of someone that would skewer her

eyeball with a fingernail, but despite everything she cannot bring herself to fear her sister.

Peko shakes her head. “It just doesn't look right. It still doesn’t look like her.”

“What is your *problem*?” Mukuro finally snaps, startling herself with the bite behind her words. Maybe the costume was getting to her. “I fixed every little thing you’ve criticized! We’re running out of time, give me something I can use!”

Peko grasps for words with the grace of a frustrated toddler. They don’t come. It’s true, Mukuro has followed each panel of the tutorial to a T. To anyone else, the person standing in front of them would be unmistakably Junko. But it’s not. There’s something fundamentally *wrong* that she can’t articulate, and irritation burns through Peko in her inability.

It’s not really about the mascara. Or the wig, or the voice, or the amount of swear words, nor any of the other things Peko had critiqued over the course of these practice sessions. It’s that Mukuro is an unnatural silence which refuses to be filled, the void where life has been sucked away, the danger of knowing *something* is about to happen. Junko is as subtle as a carpet-bomb. Peko knows how to sit in silence.

And so, she does something impulsive. She lunges forward to snatch the wig off

Mukuro’s head. Even caught by surprise, Mukuro is able to snatch her assailant’s

wrists out of the air. They’re usually an even match, Peko’s speed to Mukuro’s

reflexes, but whatever that *something* is about Peko tonight that Mukuro can’t put a

finger on, it’s making her slip.

“Do *not* sabotage me just because you’re jealous your *master* doesn’t ask you

for anything! It’s not my fault he thinks you’re useless!”

Mukuro strikes the nerve with precision, sees every micro twitch of a face

trying desperately to hold still. She digs in harder. “He doesn’t fall for the tool act.

Neither do I. You’re a lovesick puppy— no matter how many times he kicks you, you

keep coming back.”

“She’s going to kill you,” Peko spits. “You’re not special to her.”

“You’d be jealous of that too.”

Mukuro holds her wrists. Peko does not try to get away. The violence of this

moment is something she knows how to live in.

“We’re out of time, Peko.”

They lie there another few breaths. Mukuro can feel Peko’s blood rushing through her veins, her heart pounding with anger even as she gets her face settled back into blank marble. Once, months ago, Peko had told her that she couldn’t stand the feel of her own heartbeat. That all it did was remind her that there were things in her body even she couldn’t control. How livid she must be now, pinned to Mukuro’s bed, knowing the one on top of her can feel the autonomic betrayal of her veins under her skin.

When Peko shoves Mukuro off, she lets her. She’s already been as cruel as she has energy for.

“It doesn’t matter,” says Peko. “Junko’s gassing them as we speak. None of them even know who you are.”





Oh, Bite Me

by Cam

The stake trembles in Ikusaba Mukuro’s hand as she makes her way through the pine tree forest.

She steadies it with her free hand, stopping for just a moment to compose herself and take a few deep breaths before continuing.

There really shouldn’t be any reason to be nervous. She’s highly skilled and well-trained; everyone in her family certainly says so. The Ikusabas have been hunting vampires for what must have been decades upon decades already. The training regiments and upbringings have remained unchanged the entire time, and to this day, not one has died by a vampire’s hand.

There’s no reason for her to be so anxious over her first mission; nothing can possibly go wrong. After all, if this vampire, in particular, is only killing creatures in the forest, how strong and intelligent could they be? A part of her wonders if it really is a danger, but that’s just wishful thinking.

There’s no such thing as a good vampire. And our dear hunter here has always been a bit of a “black sheep” with her “emotions.” From a young age, Ikusabas are taught to shove their emotions down and never let them claw their way back up; or at least until

they’re in a quiet, private place where there is absolutely no chance of them being caught resurfacing.

The black-haired girl shakes her head slightly, willing her thoughts to start racing so that she can focus.

She stills, listening to the sound of the wind whipping through the branches, squirrels and other little critters dancing from tree to tree. Reports of the creature being spotted around this area of the forest kept coming into her home, so this is the best spot to check.

Ikusaba shuts her eyes, blocking out the useless background noise and only focusing on what she needs to hear. And this can be a plurality of things. Footsteps, yelps, retreating animals. She also pays attention to see if she can sense anyone close to her watching her.

But maybe she shouldn’t be letting her guard down slightly without being armed.

She reaches into her holster and pulls out her stake, the one she received on her eighteenth birthday, before getting ready for her first try at a first hunt that, unfortunately, was cancelled, so here she is, trying again.

Her grip tightens and untightens around the handle, complete with the family seal to match the tattoo on her hand. She shifts her weight from one foot to the other, sharply scanning the area.

Deciding there is nothing here, she decides to move on and go deeper into the forest. Sure, if she needs assistance, she'll be further away from anyone who can help her but again, she should be able to handle herself. She's expected to.

A sudden flicker in the trees up ahead makes the ebony-haired girl freeze in her tracks and struggle to regain control over her now sped-up breathing.

Was that a humanoid shape? Or maybe it was a large animal or a branch. Or perhaps even it was nothing at all.

Only one way to find out.

Ikusaba steels her nerves and trudges on, following the shape deeper and deeper into the woods. She silently stalks after the figure for a few minutes before it finally comes to a stop in front of a bed of flowers.

From her position behind a particularly tall tree, the black-haired hunter can finally take her first good look at the creature.

Indeed in terms of appearance, it is mostly humanoid. It has long, wavy midnight-blue hair to match its bright eyes. It's of average height with a lovely figure that fits perfectly under its lacey dress.

However, there are other features about it that make it distinctly inhuman as well.

Two fangs are poking out of its content smile. Its skin is flawless, with not a blimp or blemish on it. Every movement is done with grace to match its seemingly-supernatural beauty.

A vampire.

Ikusaba looks down at the weapon still in her grip, reassuring herself that she will have the upper hand and the element of surprise against this weak-looking creature. The sooner she gets this done, the better.

'Keep yourself calm,' She urges herself, *'It's going to be okay...Remember your training.'*

She bursts from behind the tree in one fluid motion, letting out a high-pitched battle cry as she charges toward the vampire.

The other creature's eyes widen in surprise, whirling around at the sudden noise just in time to be slammed into a tree she happened to be standing next to.

The hunter acts quickly, poising the edge of her weapon right over where the creature's heart should be. She looks down with a glare into the vampire's eyes, who's staring right back up at her, unmoving as if it's utterly captivated with Ikusaba.

Sandwiched between a thick tree trunk and a stake, Maizono can't move without being hurt in some way, shape or form. The tip of the stake digs right into her chest, threatening to break through her skin at any moment.

Her eyes flash between the weapon and the intense violet eyes of its bearer.

Something is strange with the eyes, however. Behind all of the intensity and determination appears to be a terrified young girl. An innocent human out here all alone...this is probably her very first hunt.

She's beautiful...and her fragrance is unlike anything she's ever smelled.

The hunter's heart beats fast with an odd combination of nerves and adrenaline, pumping something that smells rather delicious through her veins; it makes Maizono start to salivate.

But she's oh-so-beautiful. Captivating. This hunter...

The vampire can't stop herself from speaking.

"You...Wow..."

Ikusaba furrows her brow. "What?

Maizono gestures vaguely with the limited freedom she has. "You're just...incredible."

"W-What?!" Ikusaba sputters, nearly dropping her weapon in the process, "What the hell is that supposed to mean?! No, like, how does your mind work? Like, I'm about to kill you, and you say *that*?!"

The creature hums. "Oh? Are you about to kill me?" Sparkling blue eyes drift down to the shaking pale hand holding the weapon, raising an eyebrow, "Your hand is trembling so much, I'm not sure you can..."

The hunter stiffens, horrified that her fear has been found out. "*Shut up,*" She growls, "Just shut up. *I am* going to *kill you.*"

The fluttering of the hunter's heart is so enticing...

"...No, I still don't think you are. Besides, you would've done so already."

In one fluid moment, Maizono moves her arm, swatting the weapon out of Ikusaba's hand. The ebony-haired girl's eyes widen in surprise at suddenly being disarmed, and she automatically takes a step back.

Maizono gives her a smug smile, rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet but making no move to attack her.

Mukuro immediately scrambles after her weapon, but before she can get very far, the vampire’s hand shoots out, fingers curling around her wrist, locking her in place. “Not so fast,” She warns, “There’s not going to be any murder until we talk this out like two mature adults.”

Ikusaba’s eyes narrow. “I don’t negotiate with monsters.” She hisses.

The creature’s grip tightens. “I don’t think you have much of a choice here, darling hunter,” She tugs Ikusaba closer, nearly overwhelming herself with the human’s sweet fragrance, “See, now you have the disadvantage! You don’t have the strength to break away from my grip, and I’m not sure you’d be able to beat me if it came to hand-to-hand combat. And I don’t think you want to wait until I get thirsty. *So calm down.*”

Ikusaba glares hard back at her but relents. “...Fine.”

She swings a punch at Maizono’s head, but the creature ducks easily, twisting Ikusaba’s arm. The human winces, sucking in a sharp breath through clenched teeth.

“See, that was rude, Miss..?”

“There’s no way in hell I’m giving you my name.”

“Well, that’s fine. My name is Maizono Sayaka, in case you were wondering. I’d say it’s a pleasure to meet you, but...” The vampire trails off awkwardly, raising an eyebrow at her new companion.

“Fine. If you want a fair fight, I’ll give you a fair fight. Let me go get my weapon.”

Maizono rolls her eyes. “I don’t want to kill you. But you clearly want to kill me for whatever reason.”

“You’re a monster!”

“-FOR WHATEver reason...But you actually don’t know anything about me.” (Did she smell this good a minute ago?) “Because you were just sent out here to do your job, right? Although, to be honest, this looks like this was going to be your first time killing anything. So you’re automatically just going to assume I’m evil in its purest form or whatever. No worries, I understand! So why don’t I just tell you about myself?”

Ikusaba twists and turns her wrists, desperately trying to wriggle her way free of the creature’s grip, only half-listening to its words. It’s just trying to say anything to persuade Mukuro to let her guard down to go for the kill anyway.

“Stop for just one second, would you?! Listen to what I have to say!”

The hunter tries to repeatedly punch at her with her free hand, prompting Maizono to duck and dodge with superhuman speed.

“You think I kill, right?! Do you think I take innocent human lives?! Huh? It’s not true!”

Ikusaba is still not listening, still hellbent on killing the creature. Her family would be disgusted and ashamed to know she hesitated this long, let alone have a conversation with it.

Maizono grabs the slightly-taller girl by the shoulders, spinning them around so that the hunter is slammed against the tree. Ikusaba can hear her heartbeat racing in her ears as she stares into the smug eyes of the creature who’s just turned the tables on her. Her weapon is still in her vision, yet still so far out of reach. The vampire leans in closer, a vicious smirk on her face.

“Maybe now you’ll finally listen to me, hmm?”

Ikusaba resists the urge to spit in her face, knowing that would lead to nothing but bad things for her. Considering that the monster is currently stronger than her and has the upper hand, as well as being disarmed, she has no choice but to be compliant.

“Oh, bite me.” She huffs.

The vampire’s smirk widens.

“That can be arranged.”

“Shut.Up.”

“Anyways, like I was saying...I’m not the evil you seem to think I am. I don’t hurt humans. Isn’t that the only issue? That my kind hurts and kills humans by feeding off of them? I don’t do that, Hunter-chan! I don’t hurt innocents; I don’t kill! I’m not sure I can say the same about you, considering how hard you’re trying to kill me, though. Ah, that is if you could *actually* kill me, you know.”

Maizono frowns, getting lost in thought for a moment. “You could’ve killed me when you attacked me first but didn’t. You froze. You hesitated. Because you’re not like the other Ikusabas in your family....”

“How do you know about my family?!”

“You’re gentler and kinder, and you have emotions. You don’t want to kill anyone unjustly. Even if they’re an undead monster.”

“You don’t know me-”

“Oh, but I do! You’re not as hard to read as you think you are, err...will you give me your name now?”

“Ikusaba is all you get. And I still don’t know how you know that!”

Maizono sighs. “All the local vampires know about your family, so they know who to be on the lookout for. Use your head. But for real, you don’t need to follow your family. You deserve to be your own person, Ikusaba-san, to forge your own identity.”

“Stop acting as if you have me all figured out!”

“I do have you all figured out,” The vampire responds softly, loosening her grip, “You can still try to kill me if you want. All I ask is that you think about what I’ve said to you today. About vampires, about yourself, about everything.”

Ikusaba immediately takes the opportunity to wiggle out of Maizono’s grip, scrambling for her weapon.

Maizono folds her hands behind her back, a serene smile on her face. “You really are beautiful, you know?”

Ikusaba’s teeth snap together. This vampire is so fricking confusing!

“...Go.” She huffs.

“Pardon?”

“Before I change my mind,” The hunter warns, raising her weapon.

The vampire’s smile widens, and she turns to disappear into the forest.

“M-Mukuro!”

The word leaves the hunter’s mouth before she can stop herself or really think things through.

Maizono freezes, slowly looking back at the other over her shoulder. “I beg your pardon?”

“...My, um, my given name is Mukuro.”

The vampire smiles.

“Pleasure to meet you, Mukuro.”





True Colors

by Zee

“I’m not sure if this is a good idea.”

“Huh? It’s not?” Naegi seemed genuinely surprised when he glanced away from the fence to give Mukuro a look. On the other side of it sat the local paintball park, a thick and enclosed forest. The perfect battleground for colorful combat with the trees providing plenty of cover. “I thought it’d be something you might like.”

“Well... I do like the idea,” Mukuro admitted. Really, she did. This was the perfect activity for the Ultimate Soldier, and she appreciated he was keeping her in mind. Where else could she put her incredible talent to use with something everyone could enjoy? But on that note... “I just feel it might end up a bit... you know. One-sided.”

Naegi laughed softly, the fence rattling as he pulled away from it. “Yeah, probably. But I don’t mind! So long as you have fun.”

Spending time with him *was* always pretty fun. And yet, Mukuro looked into the forest again, unsure. “It’s thoughtful, but I don’t think you have any idea what you’re getting yourself into. Really, if you’d rather do anything else...”

“No, no! This is fine, I promise.” He’d come up with this surprise for her, and she’d said she liked it, so as far as he was concerned it’d be a good time for the two of them. “Come on, let’s head in!”

Mukuro opened her mouth to protest, but quickly shut it with a blush when he took her hand and guided her to the entrance. She kept quiet for now while they headed inside.

One payment later, the two of them were suiting up in the backroom. Each geared up in the typical paintball garb - a face-shielding helmet, some padded body armor, and sleek black shooters loaded to the brim with a wide palette of pellets.

And yet, Mukuro continued to try and talk him down. “We can still back out. Or I could give you an advantage.” After a moment’s pause, she slowly took her weapon

and pointed it at her own chest. It went off with a click, the woman completely unflinching as goop splattered her covering in red. “Oops.”

Behind his visor, Naegi gave her an unamused look. “I appreciate the offer, but I’m not going to quit. In fact, I don’t want you to hold back!”

“But...”

Her voice died off when Naegi reached up and put a hand on her shoulder. Though they couldn’t see each other’s eyes, it was clear how serious he was about this. Finally, she gave in and nodded. “Alright. If that’s really what you want...”

Pleased that she was finally going along with it, Naegi let her go and hoisted his paintgun. “Don’t worry about me - I’ll be giving it my all, too. Let’s make this a fun game!” Somehow, his claim didn’t seem to make her feel any better.

With Mukuro finally relenting, they were prepared to start at last. All they had to do was split up and head to opposite sides of the field. Before they parted ways, Naegi paused at the exit and called out to her. “Ready?”

She looked back at him, a noticeable difference in her stance. The pose of a keen warrior, already preparing to hunt their prey. For some reason, her last words sent a chill down his spine.

“Good luck.”



This definitely hadn’t been a good idea.

He’d told her not to hold back, and she wasn’t. Not one bit. ‘One-sided’ was an understatement.

As he ran through the trees in a blind panic, shot after shot fired at him from seemingly all angles, their owner unseen. He hadn't spotted Mukuro at all in the last half hour, yet she'd already turned him into a walking rainbow.

Sure, he'd signed up for this willingly, but that didn't make it any less terrifying. As he ducked and stumbled across the course, he realized that when she was in her element, Mukuro was basically a force of nature. Strong. Sudden. Deadly.

Another shot pierced the trees, slamming directly into his faceguard. He cried out, struggling to wipe his mask clean while he ran. Even half-blind, the shots kept coming, relentless, accurate. There was no mercy on the battlefield.

Out in the trees, Mukuro watched him like a hawk, always following just out of sight, only sitting still when he glanced her way. Whenever there was an opening, she let loose, nailing shot after shot, no matter the distance. It certainly helped that Naegi had long ago given up on trying to take cover, making him an even easier target.

She did feel bad for him, but he'd asked for her full power... and since only fun and honor was on the line, she complied. This was a nightmare of his own creation.

A nightmare he already wanted to wake up from. Normally, a game of paintball could last a couple of hours or so. Naegi wasn't sure if he could last five more minutes. If this kept up, he'd be completely unrecognizable, his clothes permanently stained... and he was wearing his favorite hoodie. Heck, with how layered he was getting, he worried the paint might stain his skin, too. He didn't want to be purple!

He was an optimist, but there was a difference between having hope against all odds and going up against an unstoppable force. This was *definitely* the latter. As much as he didn't want to admit he'd made a poor choice, he knew when to throw in the towel. Gun in hand, he finally stopped running and threw his arms up in surrender. "Alright, alright! Uncle! I give-"

Before he could finish, his weapon slipped from his grasp and fell. "Oops...!"

It landed at just the right angle to discharge on its own, firing a stray shot off into the treeline. A streak of lime zipped quickly out of sight.

“AH!”

A surprised shout suddenly rang out. Naegi jumped in surprise, cautiously stooping down to pick up his dropped weapon. “Hello?” he called out.

All was quiet for a moment, and then, rustling came. A second later, Mukuro stepped into the clearing. She was unblemished... except for a single splatter of green directly in the center of her mask. “How did you...?” she wondered aloud, just as surprised as he was.

Naegi chuckled sheepishly. “Would you believe it was a lucky shot?” he explained. Literally.

After a moment’s silence, the two suddenly burst into laughter together, his high, hers low. Of course. If anything could besmirch her flawless record, it’d be him and his knack for making the world work both for and against him.

Yet, she didn’t mind that much. This game hardly compared to actual war. Still, it was a small loss that they’d keep between the two of them. No one else would ever know the Ultimate Soldier had been struck on the battlefield. “Still want to surrender?” she asked him.

“Yes.” He was going to quit while he was ahead, without a hint of shame. Still... he did wish he could’ve been a better opponent for her. “I’m sorry, though,” he murmured, rubbing the back of his head. “It must not have been very fun destroying me like that. I didn’t put up much of a fight...”

“Don’t be so down.” Mukuro removed her helmet, offering him a faint, freckled smile. “You’ve done what hundreds of others couldn’t.” She showed off the stained visor to him again. “You hit me. As far as I’m concerned, you were a worthy opponent.”

When she put it like that... yeah, sure. It'd been entirely luck, but in a way, he'd succeeded. He felt a little better. "But what about the first half hour?" he asked, gesturing to the plethora of stains all over him.

"..." Her mouth quirked to the side. "I won't tell if you don't."

Something he could agree on. He took off his own helmet to nod, his face streaked with sweat yet still cleaner than the rest of him. "Deal."

Their secrets were safe, but Mukuro still didn't look particularly happy. Now it was her turn to look morose, turning away, unable to meet his eyes. "I hope you won't think less of me."

"What?" Naegi scoffed. "Of course not! That shot was a fluke and we both know it."

"Not that." He shut his mouth, confused. She went on. "I... don't often show that side of me. The soldier side. I know it's probably scary." She rubbed her wrist, just

above the brand on the back of her hand. She had no regrets about her choice of talent - she'd choose it again a thousand times over. But she also knew it was the kind of thing that might scare people off. Here, it was just an incredible advantage.

Anywhere else...

Naegi frowned. Had the experience been terrifying? Yes, definitely yes. He didn't want to imagine what she could do with that level of skill and a tool a bit more lethal.

So he wouldn't. He'd just offer what he thought of what he'd seen, here and now. "Honestly? I think it's impressive. I didn't stand a chance. You're incredible!" He laughed lightly, drawing her gaze again. "If I could go back and suggest something else, I'd still pick this. Because it made you happy. Because it let me get to know you a little better."

Her face heated up again. Somehow, no matter how corny what he said was, it was always touching. Heartfelt and honest. It was a talent of his that she never really understood, but hoped to someday. "Then I'd say we both had a good time."

They had. She'd gotten to show her talent firsthand, he'd gotten a small win and a happy classmate. By all accounts, it'd been a successful trip. One they would probably never, ever repeat. At the least, Naegi knew now to let her go easy if they ever returned.

Still, it was time to go. The game was over.

And since they'd ended so early, that meant they still had plenty of time left to spend together... preferably *after* Naegi grabbed a bath and a change of clothes. "Hey... I've got another idea," he said to her on their way back to the entrance together. "Let me go home and wash up, then you can come over for a movie. How does that sound?"

It sounded nice, but she had a hunch he was considering her interests more than his own again. "Oh? Let me guess. *Saving Private Ryan? Apocalypse Now?*"

"Are those your favorites?"

She laughed. "You do realize it's alright to suggest things *you'd* like, right?"

"I could. But I think seeing your smile is worth a lot more than that." He shrugged sheepishly. "Plus, my interests are pretty ordinary, anyway..."

If he kept making her face red, it was gonna stay that way at this point. He might be the Ultimate Lucky Student, but Mukuro felt like the lucky one for meeting someone so considerate. Maybe his fortune was contagious?

She shook the thought from her head. "I'm sure you're exaggerating. I wouldn't mind trying them after doing all these things for me. It's only fair. I'd rather it go both ways."

How could Naegi say no? He'd insisted she go all out on the battleground, and she'd no doubt insist he show her the things he was into. "Sure... we can talk about it more after some films. I won't say no to an excuse to spend more time with you."

And you know what? Neither would she. His hand found itself slipping into hers again as they stepped back into the main building.







Mission: Inshoppable

by Otello

“Mukuro? You okay?”

Komaru’s voice yanks her back to earth, onto unsteady feet. Well, not quite, as they’re both sitting in Mukuro’s Jeep, e-brake firmly deployed, in a mostly-empty parking lot, outside of a perfectly ordinary mall. There’s no danger, no enemy to expect, no moment where all of this horrid tension could be released and shaped into movements that gave her full control of the battlefield and the lives of all that lie within it.

Mukuro is almost certain there had been caffeine in that vanilla bean crème frappuccino; it was the only explanation for why she feel so on-edge. It would be ridiculous for her to be anxious about a shopping trip, about spending time with her boyfriend’s sister. She’s faced death countless times, so this should be a piece of cake.

“Yeah,” she makes herself say, “of course. Where did you want to go first?”

“Uh.” Komaru fidgets with her hands; she doesn’t move to undo her seatbelt.

Shoot, that wasn’t the right thing to say. But what is? It *sounded* like it was, but, more often than not, Mukuro is wildly wrong about things like this. She had tried asking her sister for advice, in preparation for this event. But she only rolled her eyes at the question.

“Don’t know what to tell ya, sis,” Junko said. The clacking of acrylic nails against the screen of her iPhone 14 Pro Max paused as she threw a glance back at Mukuro. “You can’t

really teach someone how to act ‘normal,’ yanno?” She turned back to her phone. “Why don’t you ask Makoto? He seems pretty good at it.”

But Mukuro *has*, and it never worked. Makoto was just so *nice*, always saying she’s perfect just the way she is now. Arguing with him about it proved fruitless. Mukuro’s accepted there would constantly be this barrier between her and other people, her experiences turning her into someone, *something* else, unknowable, alien.

So why is it, out of all the possible options, Komaru chose *her* to help her find a birthday gift for her girlfriend? Makoto would be busy that day, as was every other person on earth, apparently.

“Ugh!” Junko tossed the phone onto the couch and jumped to her feet. “Can’t believe I gotta wait twenty minutes for everything to sync. Getting new phones is such a pain.”

“You could try...not breaking them so often,” Mukuro said.

Junko snorted. “Us *civilians* can’t get tactical whatever-the-hecks like you do. It’s not my fault glass is so fragile, that’s the whole point of glass!

“And, besides, you’re over-thinking this. Just be your regular ol’ boring self and you’ll be fine!”

Regular, boring...of course! With how good Makoto is at gift giving—and how hopelessly dreadful Junko is—it’s easy to forget what lies firmly in-between. The absolutely uninspired, inoffensive presents people buy for someone they don’t know particularly well

but still felt pressured to get a present for, like a distant cousin, or their second-grade teacher. It would be perfect. Foolproof, even!

“Actually,” Mukuro says, “I think I know a good place to start.”



She’s no stranger to heavy scents, chemical acidity, and a thickness to the air that could be cut with a glimmering knife. But oil and gunpowder and dirt and blood hold a familiarity that’s comforting. They signal that Mukuro is in her element, a space where she knew what to do and to do it well, without fear or trepidation.

Bath & Body Works is not that.

The store is bright, white furnishings and white light and vividly colored bottles and canisters and shiny plastic packaging and it’s a *lot*. The smells layer over each other into some unidentifiable disharmony, where the component elements cannot be picked out from the effluvious noise. The only common undercurrent is the artificiality of it all. The ocean or a forest or a slain combatant could be an overwhelming mix of smells, but they mesh, billions of years mastering the complex bouquets.

“This *is* a good idea,” Komaru says, tapping her chin in thought. “But I’m not quite sure if she’s ever mentioned having a favorite scent.” She begins to wander around the store, Mukuro falling close behind.

Toko is a writer, right? What do they like? Books, pens, musty libraries, cups of tea?

But what inane “mood” would that translate to? Lakeside Morning? Sweater Weather?

Marshmallow Fireside? Well, that one seems more hygge than the others. But Toko also

doesn’t seem like the kind of person who’d enjoy something soft and saccharine like that. Or

would ever be invited to such an event.

Then again, Mukuro hadn’t expected her to be content dating anyone who isn’t

Byakuya Togami. *Especially* someone as unremarkable as Komaru. Still, she wouldn’t have

expected Makoto to be interested in her, either, but....

No, think of this as a mission. She needs more information before making a tactical

decision. And then escaping this uncomfortable situation as fast as possible. “Does Toko

have any favorite foods?”

Komaru looks up from the candle she was smelling and tilts her head. “Why do you

ask?”

“Uh.” Another misstep? “Well, I thought...maybe there’s some fruit she likes, or

something.”

A beat. Then an “Ohhh.”

“What?”

“When I said this was for my girlfriend, I should have been more specific. This is for

Jill.”

“Are you and Toko no longer together?” Did Mukuro miss that? Makoto hadn’t said

anything, or is she not supposed to know? Or—

“It’s not that. I have two girlfriends.”

“And Toko is...okay with that?” She...does not seem like the kind of person who would

be happy sharing.

“Well, yeah! Jill introduced me to Toko, after all.”

“Do I know her?” Mukuro asks.

“No. She, uh, went to a different school than everyone else. And she’s...busy with

work a lot. So not a lot of people have met her.”

Fair enough. “So, what does she do for a living?”

“...An exterminator, I guess you could call it.”

A not-very-feminine job based around death and destruction; Mukuro completely

understands. But at least there isn’t much of a risk the rat could sneak up on you and take

you down first. “Is this still for her birthday?”

“Yeah, still a birthday gift.”

Two girlfriends with two birthdays so close to each other? Even Makoto would

struggle coming up with something in this situation. No wonder Komaru needs outside help.

But, with this new information, perhaps this isn’t the best place for a gift. If Makoto

had gotten her a candle or glittery body lotion, Mukuro would be appreciative of the gift.

Maybe she'd worry that she hid so much of her true self, he had to go with the banal and inoffensive choice. It would be a sign she should open up more. The gift would have much more value and meaning than what was simply on the surface.

But if that happened while Makoto had given a great gift for his *other* girlfriend...Mukuro doesn't want to put into words what she's feeling. She would end up single in that hypothetical situation, in some form or another.

No! Komaru won't end up bug bombed for giving a crappy gift if Mukuro has anything to say about it.



"Is the sign missing a letter?" Komaru asks.

"Why would you say that?" Mukuro asks back.

"It's all in lowercase. But I'm not really sure what it's supposed to be...."

"That's just how it's spelled." Perhaps goop isn't a well-known brand to the non-elites.

Or those not forcibly tuned in to the shopping desires of the elites. But goop is health-conscious! It's trendy! It has everything a woman needs to be the best version of herself! It *sounds* like something the everyday woman would have heard about, but what would Mukuro know?

The interior of the store looks like whatever house the brand constantly uses in their Instagram posts. One wall has a rack of trendy clothes on wooden hangers, the other a long marble countertop with white brick backsplash. Ceramic pans and other kitchen tools hang off a brass towel bar.

"This store is really cute!" Komaru says. She gravitates to the rack of clothes. "Jill normally dresses pretty plain."

"Maybe she'd like something comfortable to wear around the house?" Mukuro offers. It's easy to forget people pick out clothes they like to wear, not what they *have* to for their job. There must be a lot of unpleasant situations as an exterminator, so being able to come home and change into something comfortable and collapse onto the couch sounds ideal.

Or is that not how people normally act? Junko wears incredibly uncomfortable outfits and works long days and never once complained about it. If anything, she wants *more* people to do the same thing. Do normal people only choose to relax on vacation? Maybe this is the wrong suggestion, too....

"Is there, uh, cheaper stuff here?" Komaru asks quietly.

"Oh." Right, not everyone has Junko-tier income. Or could write off most purchases as "business expenses." "There's some smaller things in the back." Should she have asked for Komaru's budget? But asking someone how much they make is rude, isn't it? It doesn't *seem* like a thing that normally comes up in conversation. Military pay is all public record, so

there’s never a need to ask. Plus, it’s easy enough to figure out who just got a raise when they show up with a new tattoo or Dodge Charger.

Mukuro realizes she isn’t exactly sure what Komaru does for a living, or how much an exterminator makes, either. It isn’t a very pleasant job, and it takes a certain kind of person to get their hands dirty to that extreme. So that *should* pay fairly well, but she has the suspicion it probably doesn’t work out that way.

There’s several wooden shelves with products neatly lined up in rows or in wire baskets along the back wall. Mukuro is now keenly aware of the lack of visible price tags on anything, and also that the core client base of goop isn’t in the habit of keeping a close eye on their spending.

“Oh, they have journals,” Komaru says. “I know Jill’s been wanting to keep a log of her hobbies.” She picks up the dusty rose-colored notebook and carefully cracks it open. “But this seems to be more about food and...mindfulness, whatever that is.”

“It’s like...being in the moment? Being aware of what’s going on.” Or at least that’s what Mukuro gathered. It’s popular enough to talk about in vagueities and use in hashtags, but she’s unsure if Junko actually uses it correctly.

But how Mukuro had to “live in the moment” was more of a matter of survival. She couldn’t worry about hypothetical conversations when she’s outmanned and outgunned.

Most of the things people worry about are no longer a concern for her, since she had so many terrifying problems stare her down over the years.

Still, it might be that way for an exterminator, too. There has to be bugs that are crafty, dangerous, waiting for you to inevitably mess up when imagining what you should have said to your mean boss. A mistake didn’t mean death, but that your target would live another day, and maybe learn how to avoid your traps the next time. Not deadly, but definitely an unwanted outcome.

“Hrmmm.” Komaru takes a moment to think. “I know there’s a lot of...details Jill wants to record, but she’s not big on writing things down. Things move too fast when’s doing her hobbies.”

“Is she running around a lot? Like CrossFit or sports?”

“Sort of. It’s more like...urban exploration, I guess you could call it.”

It sounds like an odd activity, but Mukuro understands. There had been a number of missions that took her to abandoned corners of cities. It might be enjoyable to do if there hadn’t been such heavy stakes hanging over her.

Komaru laughs nervously. “I know, it sounds weird, but she really likes it. She finds the whole thing calming.”

“How so?”

“How should I put it...she can do whatever she wants in a situation like that. She’s all by herself, she doesn’t have to worry what other people are expecting of her. And she’ll...end up in these ‘scenes,’ she calls them. There’s some level of artistry she finds that she can’t find in another medium.”

Mukuro had been to countless places, in countless “scenes,” and, sometimes, she would be struck with a moment of stillness. There were words, poetry, that could describe those sunrises, growing storms in the distance, the ephemera of people living as if nothing was amiss, as if Mukuro wasn’t there at all, but she couldn’t find ways to describe it in a way that did them justice. Toko, perhaps, wouldn’t have that issue, but she also isn’t in the field of running around in decrepit buildings, of constantly walking the line betwixt life and death. Something about that existence shifts how you see things.

Without the words, Mukuro only has her memories. And, sometimes, a camera, in the form of her smartphone and its Junko-proof glass. But it hadn’t been designed to take beautiful landscapes, and it was exceedingly difficult to get anything taken off it and put onto her personal device—national security, and all that—so they might as well have never existed.

Yet they still happened, had shaped Mukuro into the person she is today. All those memories felt like a dream, of a life that belongs to someone else, they were so different

from how she lives today. She’s in a mall! Without a weapon! Without the concern that any moment might be her last!

And still, it would be nice to have some tangible record of the things she’d experienced. It feels like the opposite of Junko’s day-to-day, of constantly updating her socials and snapping pics to show the world what they wanted to see of her, before they forgot, before she moves on to the next thing.

Of course!



Is it possible to feel your teeth dissolving from sugar? At least the Cinnabon has pecans on it, so it isn’t a total caloric waste.

“I never would have thought they still made Polaroids!” Komaru says.

Mukuro shrugs. “There’s a resurgence in these types of things. People are tired of everything being so fast, I think. They want things to be simple again.”

“It’s funny you mention that. Jill feels the same way. She likes the simple things, nothing too complicated.”

“And since you can’t take as many photos as you want, you have to be more thoughtful of the shots you take.”

“And you don’t have to worry about the guy at the photo store looking at them!”

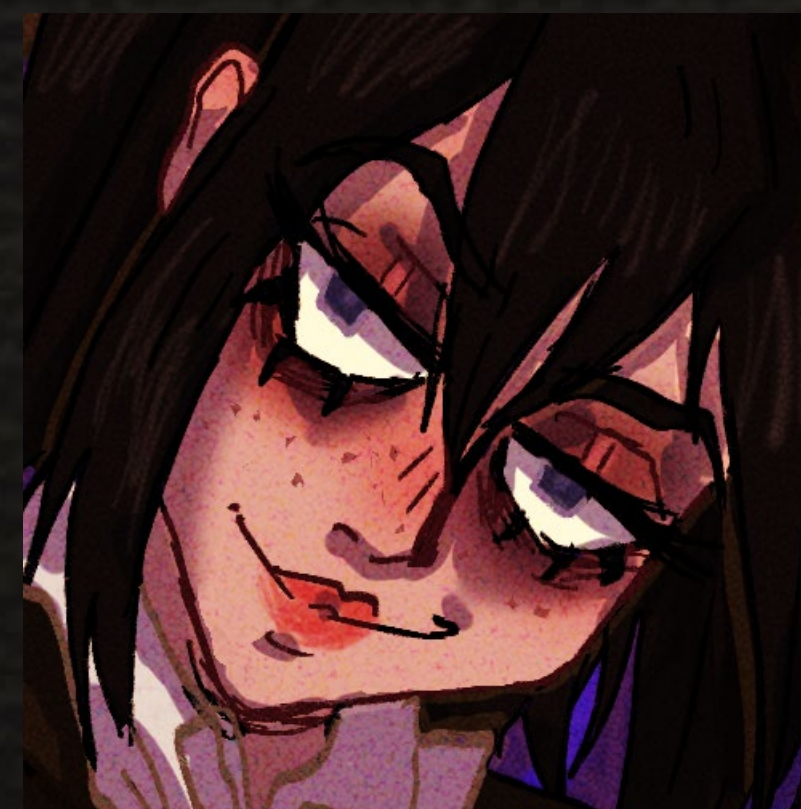
Mukuro nods. “Right, those memories belong only to you, or with someone you choose to share them with.” Anything made with a government phone ran the risk of becoming public-record, which put a damper on the kinds of photos you’d end up taking.

“I don’t know if I’d go *that* far. I...I’m not a big fan of some of the things she finds sometimes. A little too gross for me.”

Well, it’s only natural for an exterminator to have a stronger stomach. Though Mukuro wouldn’t use a word like “gross” to describe decaying urban structures, but she isn’t a writer, so who is she to judge?

“Still, I think she’s going to love it.” Komaru beams. “You were able to figure out exactly what Jill would like, and without ever meeting her! What’s your secret? Did Makoto share his gift-giving knowledge with you?”

Mukuro smiles. “I just thought of what would make anyone happy.”



Grace

🐦📷 ratrangoon



Eveline

🐦 raines_jupiter



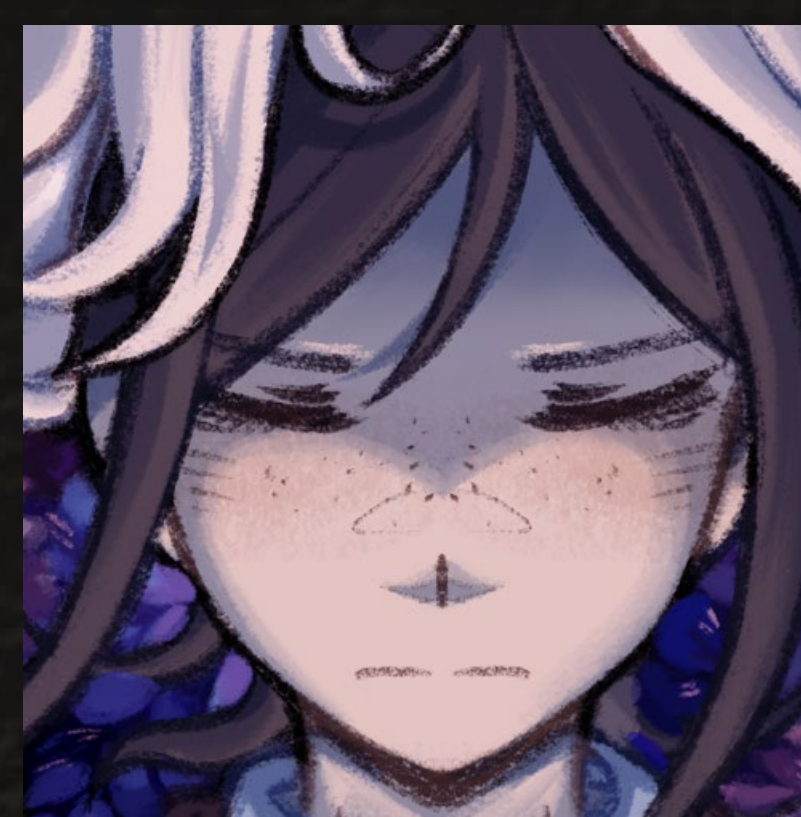
Hedge

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Serenade

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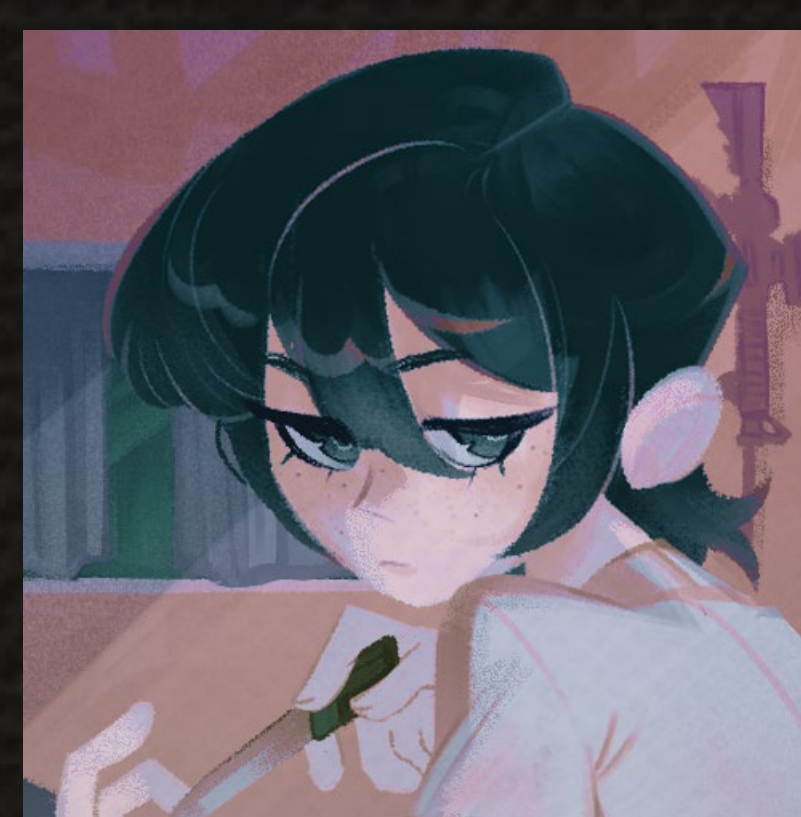
Robin

🐦📷 blazingsprings



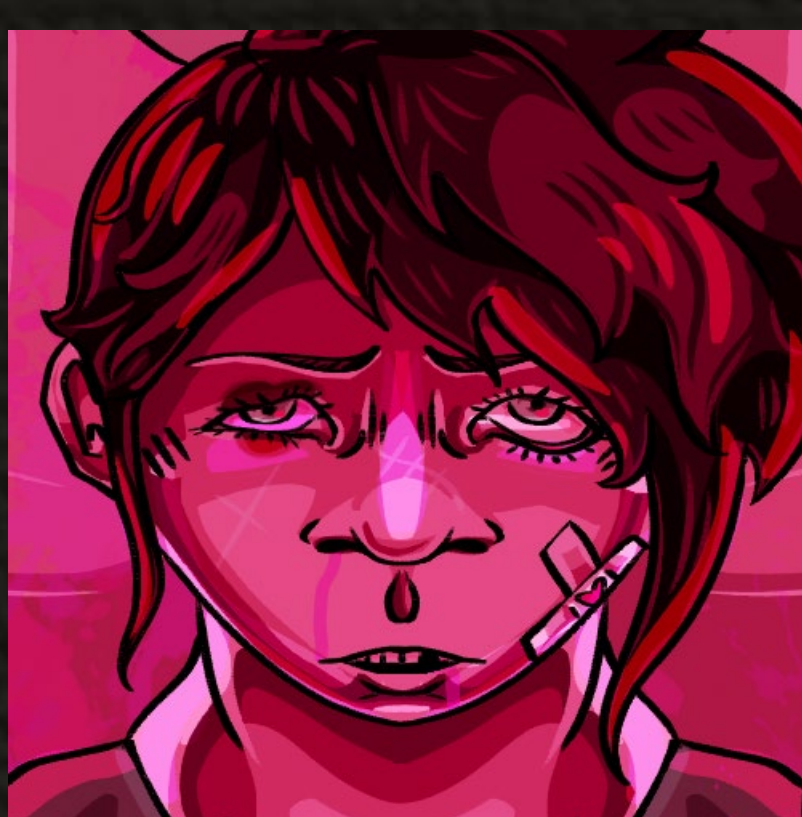
ToxicPineapple

🐦📷 toxicpineapplex
📌 toxicpineapple



Blue

🐦📷 Blueofthesunset



Harper

🐦📷 harpoon_gun
📌 cryzono



Toko

🐦 munchasaurocto
⚡ SUSHISTRIKER

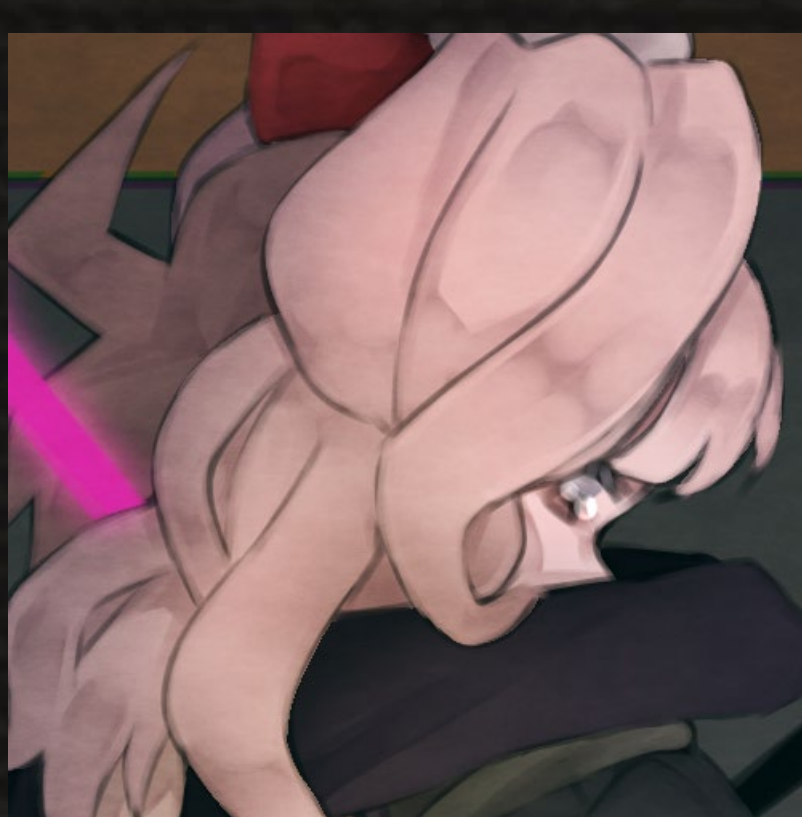


Sunny/Omori



Robin

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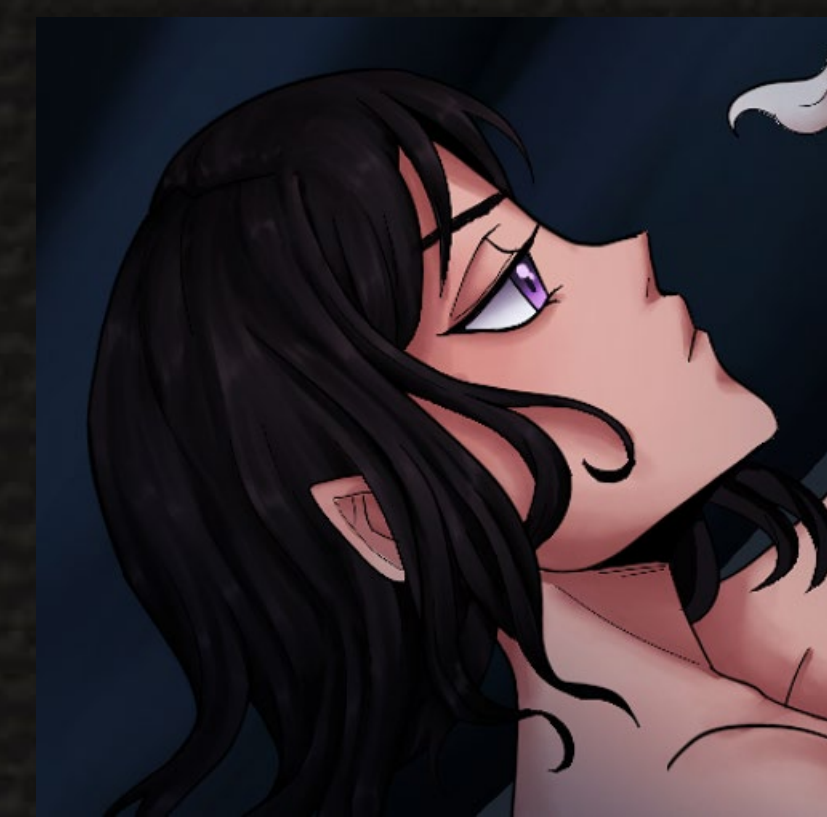


Vinillust

🐦 vinillust
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Credits



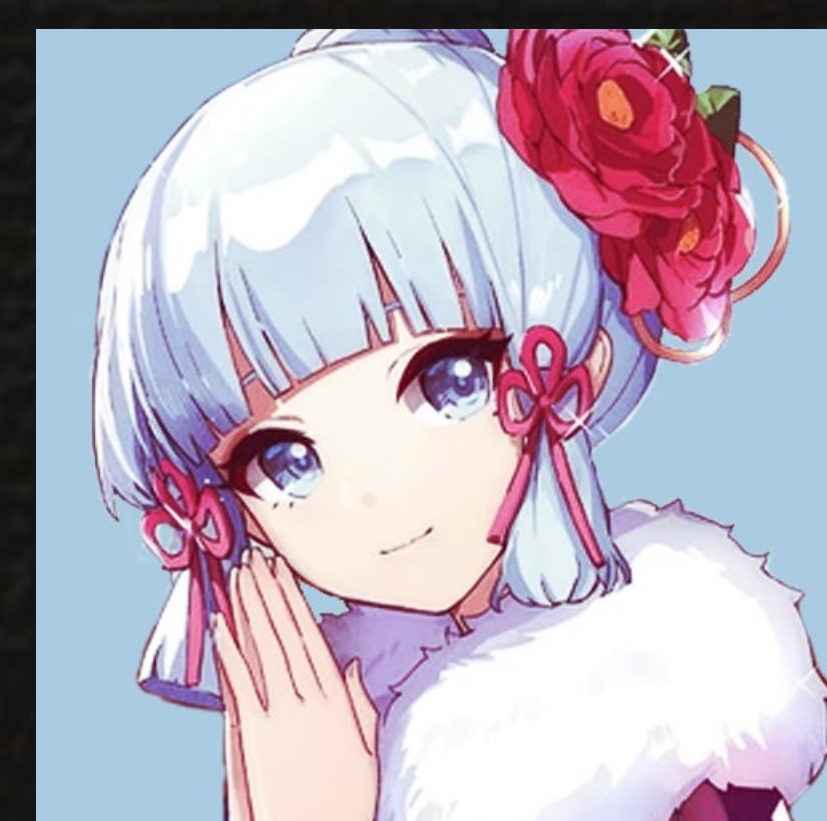
Lilly

🐦 aquaaes
📌 aquariumaesthetic



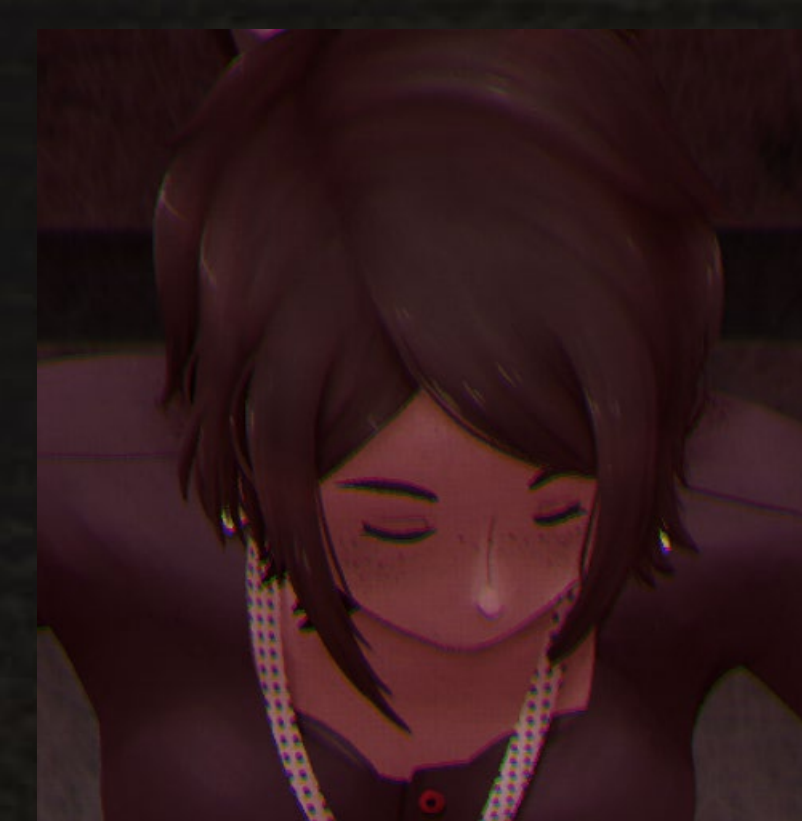
Konnie

🐦 froggiekonnie
📷 konnies_art



Lichmutual

🐦 lichwrites
📌 lichmutual



FaeOfStars

🐦📷📌 FaeOfStars



falling.fading.lost

📌 falling-fading-lost



Birdie

🐦 el3phantbird
📌 shsl despair

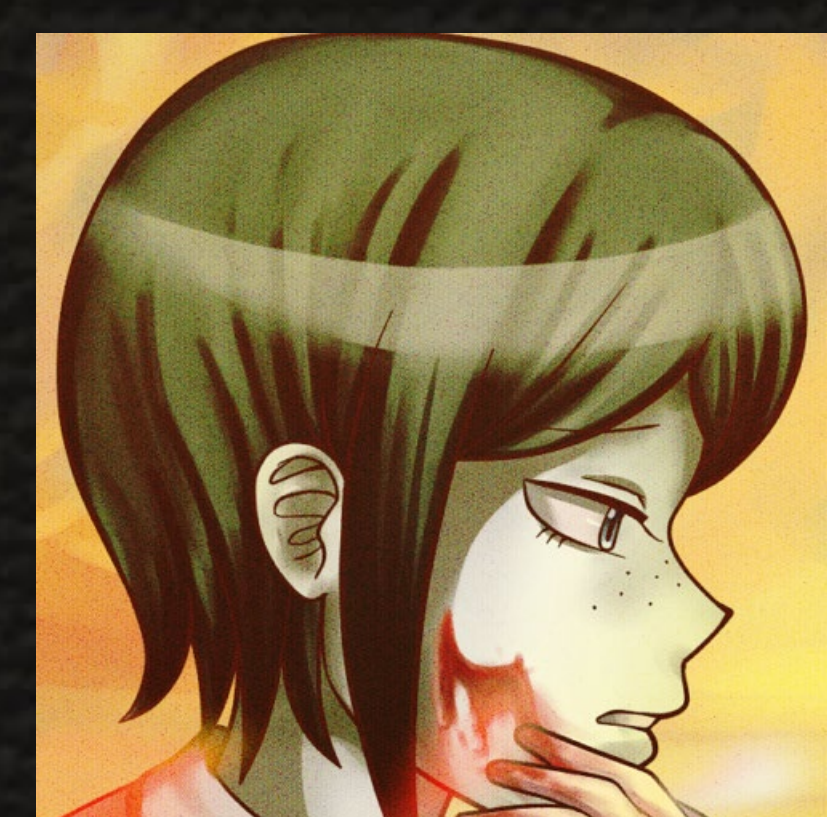


Flora

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📷 flora.fication



Charley



Pharaon90

🐦 MegumiAyano1
📷 pharaon90



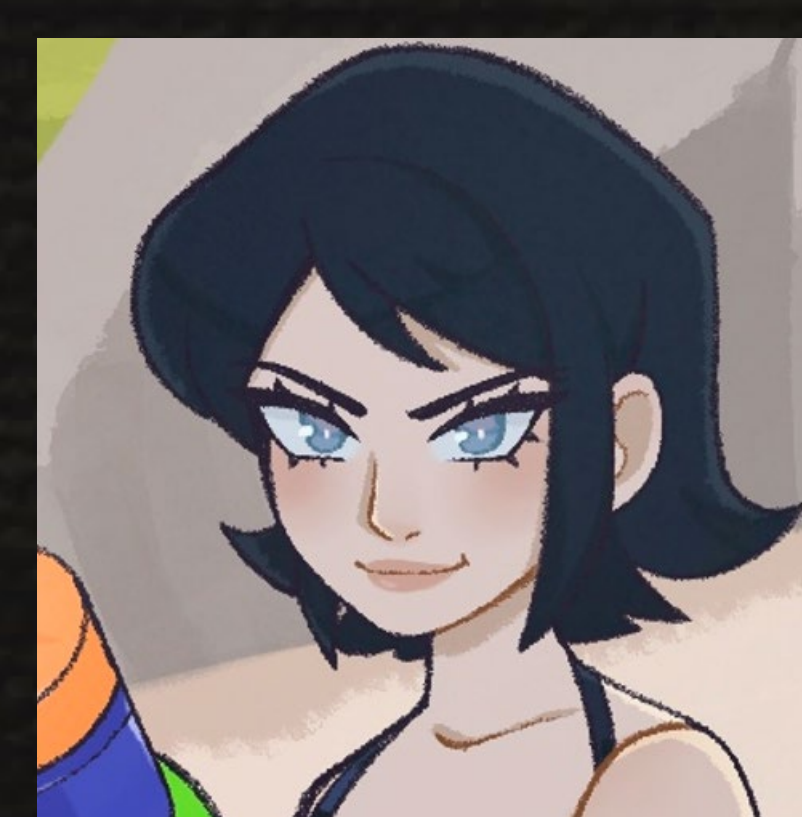
Cam

🐦 wake2nightmare
📌 Preppycat



Jai

🐦📷📌 sunndropcitrus



Soyvgato

📷 soyvgato



Credits



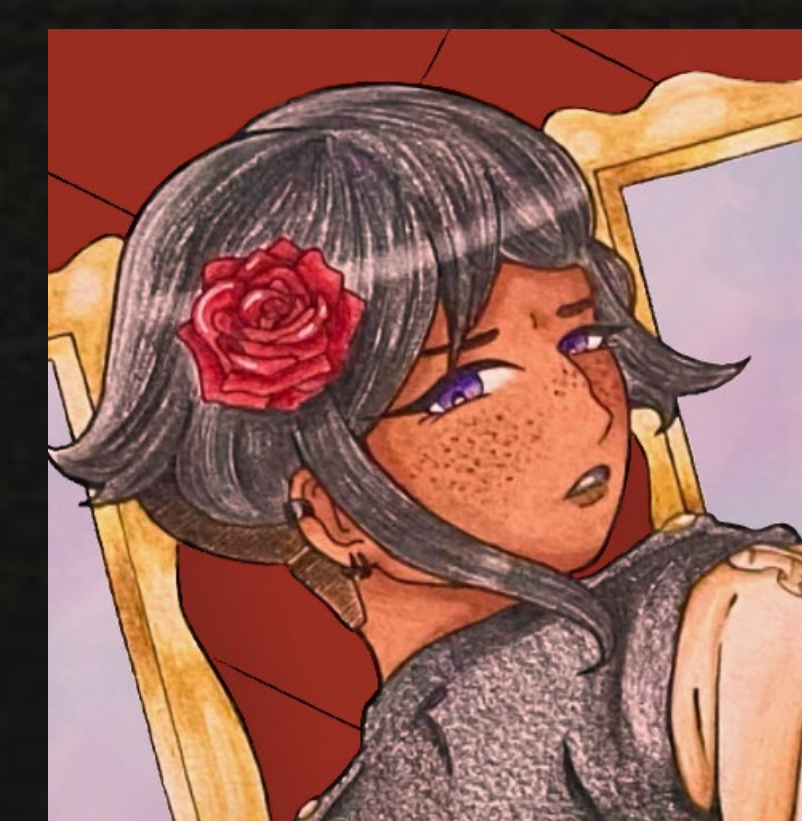
Zee

🐦 herbleberble
📌 burningfox6



crimsonsippet

🐦📷📌 crimsonsippet



PM

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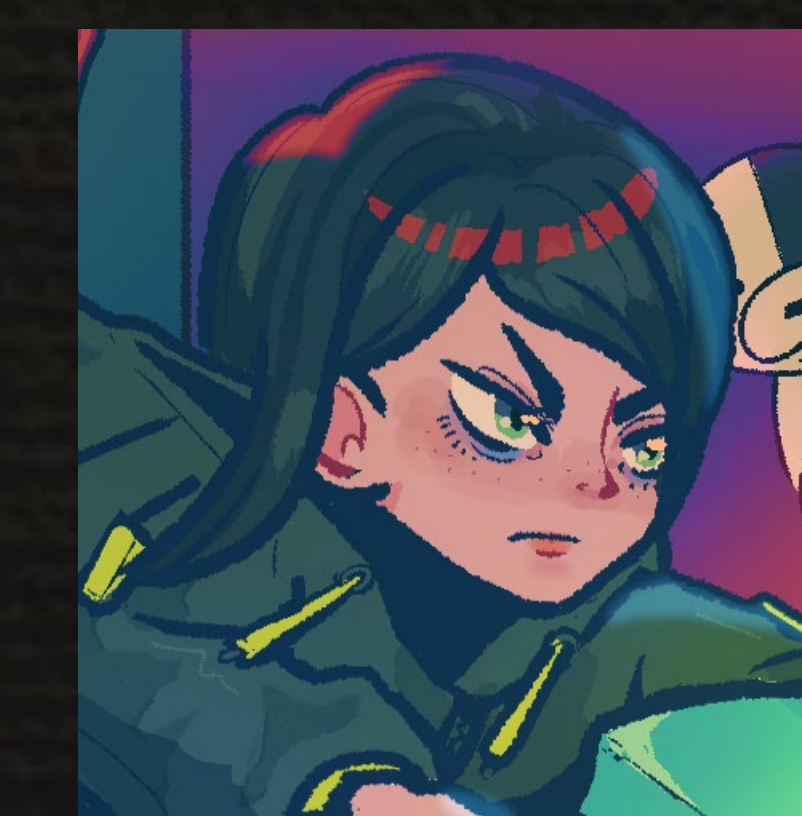
vampozer

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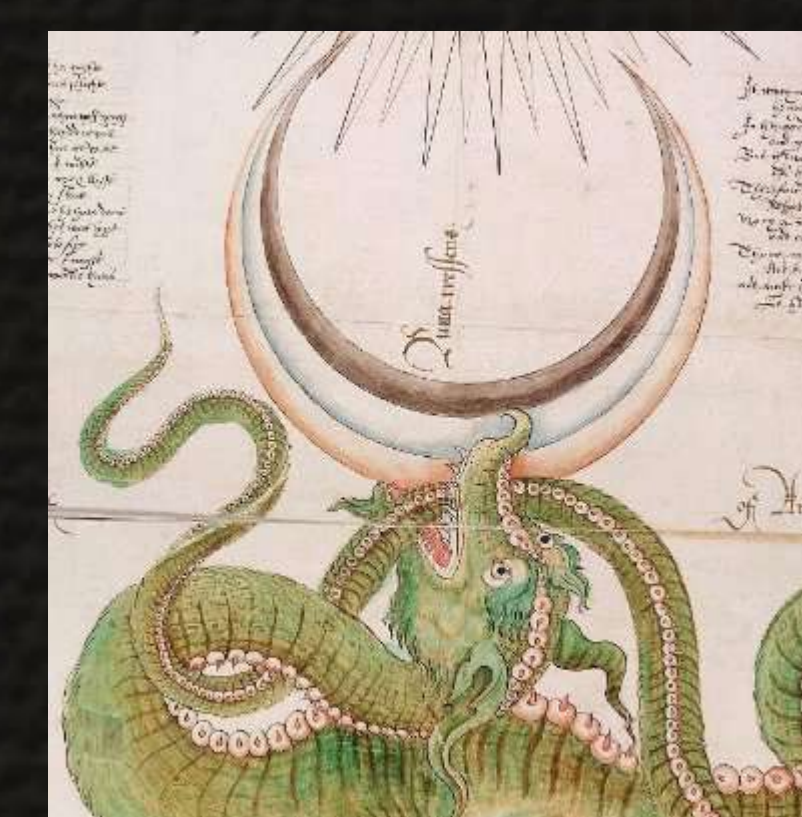
Kamryn

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Calitchee

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Otello

🐦 OtelloJonsson

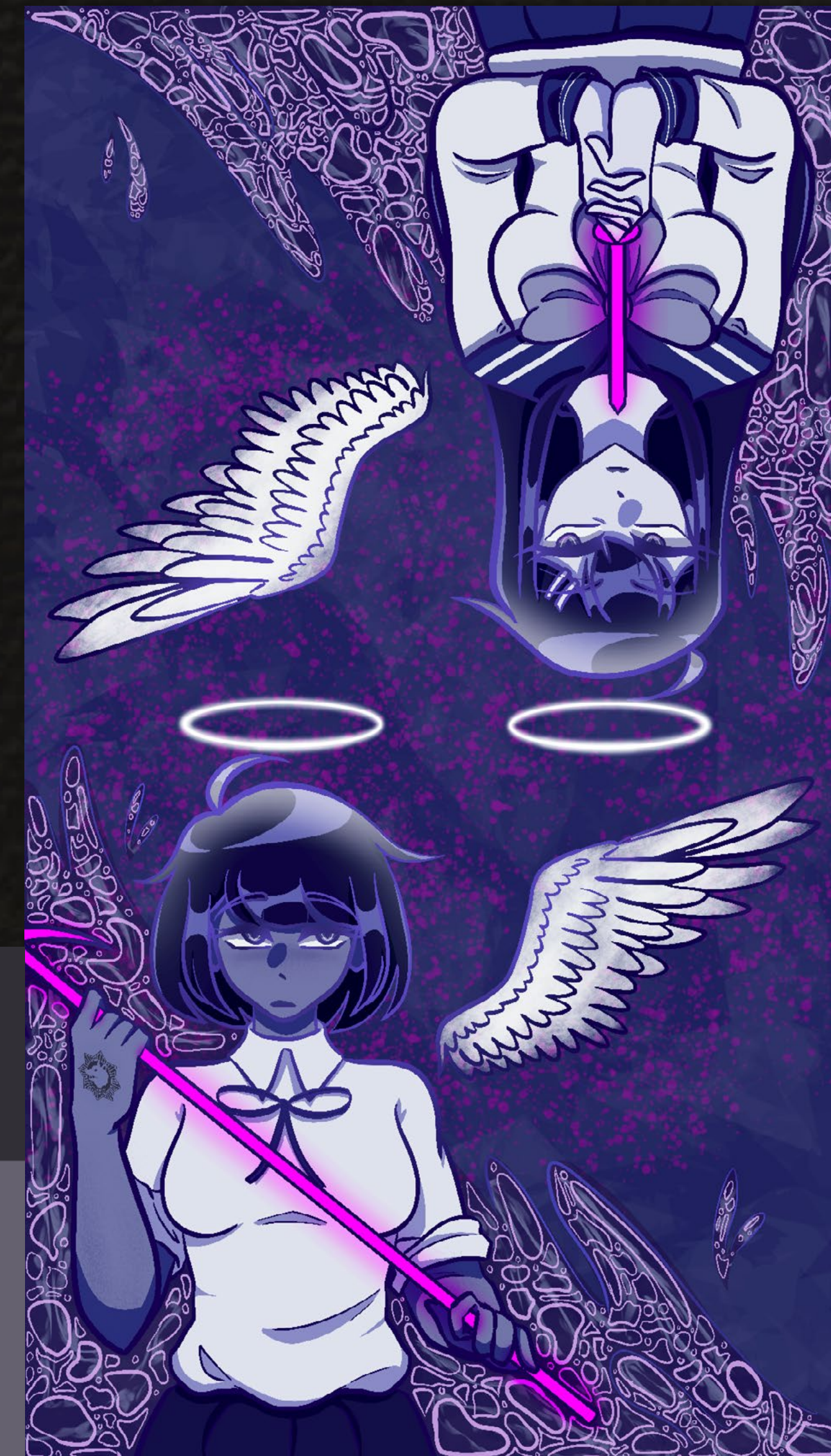


Yagito

🐦📷 Go_Hop_to_it
📌 Go-Hop-to-it

Skeleton_Orchestra

🐦 Skeleton_Orchestra



TwinkleLitchii

🐦 TwinkleLitchii



Co-Head and Co-Writing Mods

Rin
🐦 Rinnyringring

Cam
🐦 wake2nightmare

Art, Merch + Graphics Mod

Sarah
🐦 rarewishes

Organizational Mod

Bee
📖 hivezines

Layout Mod

Eli
🐦 norangery